



Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou (いちばんうしろの大魔王)

Author : Mizuki Shoutarou (水城 正太郎)

Illustrator : Itou Souichi (伊藤 宗一)

It is complete with 13 volumes published by Hobby Japan's HJ Bunko label.

It has an anime adaptation as well as a manga adaptation.

Synopsis:

"Future Occupation...Demon King."

Sai Akuto enters Constant Magic Academy to be useful to society and to become a top-ranked national magician. However, a horrible prediction is made on his first day. Thanks to this prediction, the class representative girl hates him, a girl with a mysterious power embraces him, a female artificial human is sent by the empire to observe him, and his school life is otherwise thrown into chaos...

Translator:

[http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?
title=Ichiban_Ushiro_no_Daimaou](http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Ichiban_Ushiro_no_Daimaou)

Translated by Js06.

Edited by Koala and Kory.

Table of chapters:

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 1

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Demon King is Born Chapter 2: The Strange Observer
Chapter 3: The Slightly Frightening Upperclassman Chapter 4: That
Highly Assumption-Prone Girl

Chapter 5: The Menacing Optimist

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 2

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Do You Like Solitary Confinement?

Chapter 2: Who is that Girl?

Chapter 3: The Three Keys

Chapter 4: The Student Council President's Rage

Chapter 5: The Cheerful Conspirator

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 3

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Let's Go on a Beach Field Trip

Chapter 2: Seaside Album

Chapter 3: A Surprise in a Dark Forest?

Chapter 4: The Legendary Hero Arrives!

Chapter 5: The Trouble Still Isn't Over?

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 4

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Someone is Targeting Someone

Chapter 2: The Shadow of Iga Fully Revealed

Chapter 3: A Truly Amazing Birthday

Chapter 4: Akuto’s Great Imperial Capital War Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 5

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Chaos from the Beginning

Chapter 2: So Many People Plotting Behind the Scenes Chapter 3: Akuto and the Flying Aircraft Carrier Chapter 4: The Perfect Ending?

Chapter 5: The Foreign Transfer Student

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 6

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Chaos Over a Date

Chapter 2: I Want to Eat Rice Pudding Chapter 3: Literature is Difficult?
Chapter 4: An Afternoon of Playing with Dolls Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 7

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: A Surprising Health Examination

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Video Game World Chapter 3: The Demon King and the Whereabouts of the Holy Grail

Chapter 4: A Fairly Large Battle

Chapter 5: The Beginning of a Dream Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 8

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: A New God?

Chapter 2: The Conquered Empire

Chapter 3: The Secret of the Demon King Chapter 4: The Very Last Demon King

Chapter 5: The Bloody Empress

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 9

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Final Battle Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Moon Chapter 3: Even if I Say Goodbye Chapter 4: An Eternal Battle Chapter 5: A Small Miracle

Chapter 6: The Two who Returned

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 10

Illustrations

Prologue

- Chapter 1: The Janitor’s Frightening Trap!
- Chapter 2: What if We Made a Copy Human?
- Chapter 3: The Three Officers’ Enjoyable Day Off Chapter 4: Welcome to the Haunted Inn Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 11

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Gather, Emperors!

Chapter 2: A True Hero

Chapter 3: Fear Falling from the Sky

Chapter 4: Colorless Flames

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 12

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Prelude to Destruction is Always Silent Chapter 2:
Concerning Life that Should Finally End Chapter 3: Approaching an
Ending that No One Wants

Chapter 4: A Wonderful World

Chapter 5: Farewell, Mankind

Chapter 6: Limbo

Afterword

Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Act 13

Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: We Have a Life even in the Underworld

Chapter 2: Eternal Happiness

Chapter 3: Many Possibilities that are Currently Absent Chapter 4:
Countless Universes

Chapter 5: Incarnation

Chapter 6: Evolution

Afterword

IUND-Books ISBN





ころね

政府から送られてきた
リラタンと呼ばれる人
造人間。常に阿九斗に
付き添い護衛と監視を
行なう。

はたとけいちゃん
服部 絢子

真面目なクラス委員。
阿九斗に裏切られたと
思い込み、阿九斗を目
の敵にしている。

あが
音我 けーな

落ちこぼれた天才少女。
阿九斗と偶然出会う
懐いてしまう。

あいの
紗伊 阿九斗

大魔王(予定)の主人公

このへん

「あ、い、いめん……!」

阿九斗はけーなに
のしかかっている
ことに気づき、立
ち上がろうとした。

「きゃ!だ、駄目!」



Prologue

It was two in the morning when everyone was fast asleep.

A small light raced across the night sky.

If any resident of this world had looked up at it, they would have known immediately what it was. It was not a shooting star, a bird, or a flying machine. It was the mana luminescence of a magic user's flight magic.

A black-haired woman wearing a luxurious long coat tore through the freezing air. The sweat on her stiffened cheek flowing backwards and flying off as a mist showed that her tense expression was due to more than just the chill of the night.

A silver symbol glowed on the chest of her long coat. The symbol depicted a snake with an apple in its mouth coiled around a double cross. Those known on this continent as black magicians chose to wear that symbol.

A small hand appeared from within the coat and began playing with the symbol. The woman was holding a baby.

While soothing the baby with one hand, she glanced over her shoulder. Flying without stirring up mana was impossible, but she would have detected a presence if she was being pursued. However, she detected no such presence. Then again, her flight was greatly stirring up the mana around her, so any pursuer would be able to track her location from afar.

"I only need to keep them from knowing where this child is," she muttered.

In order to hide her presence, she landed before reaching her destination and walked through the darkness without even using light magic. While in the air, she had seen a small town at the end of a small road through this forest. She was unfamiliar with this land, but from the layout of the town's buildings and the symbol carved into the town gate, she knew this town would suit her needs.

The town was perfectly silent. It likely had a few hundred residents, but the church near the entrance was quite large and likely had the facilities required to perform a baptism. The child needed to be baptized no matter what. Fortunately, the main god here was Ko Ro. That sect's primary doctrine was one of unconditional love. It was the perfect place to leave the child.

When the woman reflected on the fact that she would be leaving the child here, a feeling similar to relief finally budded within her. She would be leaving their child, that child on whom such great hopes were held, to a better place.

"I pray you will remain safe. And that you will have the strength required for the day you realize your destiny."

As she chanted those words of a classic prayer, she removed her long coat, wrapped the child in it, and gently placed it before the door.

"You are our hope."

And as she ran away from that church, she turned back towards the baby. Her eyes were those of a mother worrying for her child. However...

“!”

Her expression changed as she instantly realized her failure and she returned her gaze to the path ahead.

The source of the failure she felt lay in the eyes of the baby that were clearly visible in the darkness.

The baby was not crying; it was staring back at her. An obvious expression could be seen in its eyes that did not befit a child of less than a year old. It was the sulking, resigned look of a fainthearted man in his twenties after a woman broke up with him.

—There’s no helping it. I am the one at fault here...

That’s what the baby’s eyes so eloquently said.

“Your destiny may be different from the one we expect... No, that may actually be precisely what we want...”

The woman muttered to herself to fight back her unease as she disappeared into the forest.

That frighteningly mature baby stared up into the night sky and wondered why it had been left behind.

Ten years had passed since that day.

That baby that had stared up at the stars had grown into a boy who was now blankly staring up into the noontime sky. This boy named Akuto had a difficult personality. He was a perceptive child who had realized he had reached his mental peak at the age of 5. While he was 5, he had seen the orphanage teacher checking the children's schedule for that day and baffled the teacher by asking, "Will you get mad at us if we do not follow that? Do you have to supervise us with that because we are weak?" While on a trip, he had climbed a scenic mountain and pulled out the bento that was much nicer than the usual ones provided. While eating it, he had realized that he would never receive anything more luxurious than that as long as he remained in the orphanage. He was thankful for the blessings others provided him with despite him having done nothing for them, but he realized he would never receive anything more unless he began working for the sake of others. He had shed tears at this realization.

Akuto had obediently spent his time at the orphanage. He was a difficult child to control, but he had a powerful desire to not bother others and to be an overall good person. He would occasionally take some crazy actions, but never enough to lead to a major incident. However, when he was 10 and midway through elementary school, a slight commotion occurred just as he was to leave the orphanage due to a foster home being found for him. A girl of about the same age arrived at the orphanage to replace him.

She had done nothing but cry. This was unsurprising for a child sent to the orphanage because her parents had died and she had no other relatives. Akuto had stopped in his tracks when he saw her. No one had come to see him off at the entrance despite this being his big day. He

realized this was because they were spending all their time dealing with that girl. The orphanage teachers comforted the girl as they always did. There was no formalized method, but they were used to this and knew the best way to do so without hurting the child's feelings. They spoke kindly to her and tried to have her play with various stuffed animals. Those superficial words tended to work better than ones spoken with one's whole heart in it. Akuto had long since learned that due to a few different experiences, but with his personality, he could not help but find it unpleasant. And he found the orphans who all began smiling when they should have responded with deep sorrow to be even more unpleasant. However, Akuto finally realized that this girl was no normal child. Even when she took a toy accessory, she only gave it a small amount of interest before crying once more.

Akuto decided he would put an end to her tears. He had borrowed a large suitcase that he would return to the orphanage after transporting his luggage, so he left that suitcase in front of the orphanage before walking to the shopping district in the center of the town, entering the town's sole small jewelry store, buying a jeweled hair decoration with the money he had been given for his immediate living expenses (enough for an adult to live several months on), and returning to the orphanage. The girl was still crying and the teachers were obviously flustered.

Akuto slipped past the teachers, crouched down in front of the girl, and tugged on her hair to raise her head. The shocked teachers rebuked Akuto's actions, but he wordlessly held the hair decoration in front of the girl's eyes.

It took her some time to realize what was happening, but the unexpected situation made her stop crying all the same. Her round eyes, that were red from crying, looked blankly at Akuto.

She had round eyes on a round face. Each time she rubbed her eyes with her round hand, the few tufts of hair standing up on her head would shake. Her hair was a burning red, so it almost looked like flickering flames. Any girl of her age was cute, but her face made one think she would continue to look youthful even after growing up.

Akuto looked away from the girl and forced the hair decoration into her hand. She did not resist, but she looked up at Akuto with a frightened look when she noticed the jewel set within the eye of the bird-shaped silver hair decoration. Even a child could tell it was real. This was of course not something a child should own. While still looking away from the girl, Akuto told the teachers to make sure no one stole it because it was expensive, and he told the girl not to give it to the teachers even temporarily.

“Th-thank you,” said the girl in a blank voice as she looked back and forth between Akuto and the hair decoration. She was acting like he had placed an explosive in her hands.

“I am leaving so I can go work. I do not need the money I was given. You can sell this for money when you leave the orphanage or you can keep it. It is yours now. But I want you to remember that it is something as simple as receiving a gift from someone that stops people from crying. Then again, you only stopped crying for something expensive, so you may be a truly amazing girl. You could probably take on the demon king.”

With that said, Akuto returned to the suitcase and put on the long coat that he could finally wear without it dragging along the ground behind him.

"Where are you going?" asked the girl.

"I am leaving this place."

"Wait. We might be able to be friends."

"That is a shame, but I think you will only have to stay in this orphanage for a few years. If you do not get rid of that hair decoration, I will recognize you. We may meet again someday. Bye."

And Akuto took his first step out of the orphanage without waiting for the girl to reply.

Five more years passed.

He had been accepted into the household of a normal knight. It was standard for a knight to take in orphans, so Akuto was received in a businesslike manner. That businesslike manner made living there easy for Akuto, but he quickly realized it also created a difficult atmosphere for discussing anything with his foster parents. That atmosphere and Akuto's own personality made his five years there a difficult time. Every day, he would wake up before dawn to deliver milk, work at a café after school, and teach himself at night so that he could pass his entrance exam. Akuto had grown into the kind of pretty boy that any girl his age could not help but notice, but his daily schedule and his personality made him high unapproachable. During his middle school years, he never had a romantic relationship with a girl or even a single close friend. Whenever a girl was drawn in by his pretty face, he would tell her, "People should not introduce favoritism into their relationships with others, and entering into

a special relationship with someone inevitably creates a form of discrimination. However, I cannot get along with everyone and for some reason I feel frustrated when I see someone else getting along well with a pretty girl. Nevertheless, I feel it is wrong to get along with that pretty girl myself for no other reason than to rid myself of that frustration. What do you think?" It was understandably difficult for any middle school girl to like a boy who spoke such worries to them and the boys did not want to be friends with someone who acted like that to the girls.

Obviously, nothing could be done about his personality and he had a reason for living the kind of life he lived. For high school, Akuto intended to attend the prestigious national Constant Magic Academy to become a nationally certified magician. That school gave scholarships and he needed one to attend. As this dark and friendless period of his life continued, his personality grew even worse, but he viewed becoming a nationally certified magician as worth it.

The top class national magicians were undoubtedly the ones who ran the country of Japan. In a society just past the year 3000 CE, the core of the government was made up of those top class national magicians. Only they were bound by no restrictions in their use of magic to serve society and they worked in a variety of fields.

Akuto's reason for wishing to become a national magician was purely so he could help society and serve the people. He could be argumentative, but he was fundamentally a good person. This was all thanks to his powerful desire to help others that he had gained through his upbringing in the orphanage.

And finally, the day came that he was accepted into the school. Akuto almost jumped for joy. Once he was accepted, he could enter the school's dorm. Due to the scholarship he had earned, he could finally completely

leave behind his life of being supported by others.

Akuto believed he would be completely reborn in this new stage in his life. And that is precisely what happened.

However, it happened in a way he had never imagined.

Chapter 1: The Demon King is Born

Part 1

Akuto stepped off of a long-distance bullet train shaped like a long, narrow whale and onto a white platform. He dragged his suitcase along as he walked past the magician who specialized in running the train and was opening a mana screen in the space before his eyes. The station was quite crowded with people of various cultures and social statuses. Book stores and stands selling candies shaped like the imperial capital's famous green onions were lined up within the facility and that slight market was filled with activity. Even so, no arguments were evident and the uniformed security magician in the center of the concourse was toying with the shock baton at his waist out of boredom.

—The capital sure is amazing. There are so many people moving around as they please, but no chaos. They must be used to all this movement... No, everyone is headed towards what they want to buy, what they want to see, or where they want to go, but that can't be all there is to it because some people are standing still. Oh, I get it. The person who designed this station may have known what everyone wanted to buy or see, and designed it so people would flow naturally through the station according to their desires. The power of top-class magicians really is amazing.

Hold on to that thought, Akuto followed the directions displayed on a virtual screen floating over his head and headed towards the flying bus stop that would take him directly to Constant Magic Academy. The bus stop bordered on empty air and is built on the top floor of the imperial capital's central train station which is several dozen meters tall. The path leading there ended with a long stairway. As soon as Akuto began climbing those stairs, at the center of the stairway, he spotted an old woman wearing a kimono and holding a few large, heavy-looking bags.

—She's wearing a kimono, so has she received the baptism of the god Suhara?

Akuto ran up the stairs and called out to the old woman from behind.

"I can carry those for you."

The old woman turned around and looked shocked for a moment, but then accepted his offer.

The old woman's shock partially due to her faith. It was natural for everyone to have a religious faith in this society, but someone who displayed their faith on the surface was just showing how stubborn they were about their faith's doctrines. And people generally viewed Suhara followers as horribly hard to get along with. That organization bore the burden of national defense, so people often misjudged them as being "proud" or "arrogant".

"My family is an officially designated family, so people rarely help me in the city," said the old woman as she looked at Akuto amusedly.

"I think it is only natural to help someone carry something heavy. By the way, what do you mean by 'officially designated'?" Akuto asked.

"It means we are civil servants from the followers of Suhara. Other examples would be knights and those with noble titles," replied the old woman gently.

"I see."

"By the way, are you a student from magic academy?"

Akuto nodded "I am." and the old woman smiled in embarrassment.

"My granddaughter forgot her luggage. She is also a student at the academy. She returned home for the break, but left all of her luggage behind."

"All of it?"

"Silly, isn't it? She only took her daily school supplies with her."

So, the old woman and Akuto burst into laughter. A figure appeared at the top of the stairs after hearing that laughter.

"Grandmother! I thought I heard your voice, but what are you doing here!?" said a girl the same age as Akuto.

She looked surprised and glanced back and forth between the old woman and Akuto. She was wearing the uniform of Constant Magic Academy.

"You forgot something," said the old woman with a smile.

“Eh? I forgot something? What could I have-....Ehh!?”

The girl’s eyes had already been widened in shock, but now they widened even further and she brought a hand to her mouth. Her glossy hair and her almond-shaped eyes gave her an almost frightening level of beauty, but her expression displayed her emotions almost too honestly.

—How could she not realize she left that much luggage?

Akuto was surprised. The girl gave an impression of being a cool-headed beauty, yet it seemed she could be quite the airhead.

The girl looked over at Akuto, grew red in the face, and cleared her throat.

“Grandmother, who is this?”

“Oh, just a boy who helped me with these heavy bags. Such a rare thing these days. It seems he goes to your school, so you can look after him. Or perhaps he needs to look after you.”

The old woman laughed like a child.

“What? Grandmother!” The girl reflexively replied like a teased child, but her face stiffened and she cleared her throat once more when she noticed Akuto looking at her. “Ahem... I have not...seen you around school, so you must be a new student. Nice to meet you. I am Hattori Junko, the class representative for Class A. You have my thanks for helping my grandmother.”

Junko displayed her thanks like a samurai. Unlike before, her behavior perfectly matched the cool impression her appearance gave.

"No need to thank me," denied Akuto frantically.

"Oh, my. She really is going all out. I will be going then," said the old woman before bowing to Akuto and starting down the stairs.

Junko and Akuto remained in the bus stop.

Some slightly awkward time passed, but Junko eventually spoke.

"New students into the high school are rare."

"I was told there are a few others besides me. From what I heard, the standard here is to receive all your schooling here, so only those with special circumstances are allowed to transfer in."

"Yes, it is rare for someone who is not a foreigner and has not been living overseas to be accepted. What country were you living in?"

"Actually, I got in on a scholarship. I took the entrance exam."

"Oh?" said Junko in admiration. "I heard that zero people pass the exam each year. You must be an excellent student."

Akuto's cheeks loosened in embarrassment.

"Thanks. I hope this is not a rude question, but are you here to become a national magician, Hattori-san?"

"Yes. I must do everything I can for my family and for national defense."

The clumsy impression from before had completely disappeared from Junko's face. She was now the representative image of the skilled class representative and the stubborn and noble Suhara follower.

—I hope we're in the same class.

Akuto had never before had a friend he viewed as an equal. No one else in his rural town had wanted to become a magician for the sake of the country, so this was not entirely Akuto's fault. At any rate, he could tell by looking at Junko that he would find kindred spirits at this academy. Akuto grew even more excited about what lay ahead.

The flying bus arrived. Akuto and Junko were the only two on board, so they sat facing each other in the center box seats.

"Are there no other new students? I thought I was not the only one."

"The students from overseas will have arrived at the academy earlier. You will likely meet up with them for the physical examination."

"I see. ...Oh."

Akuto let out a voice as he saw the scenery outside the window.

The flying bus had flown into the sky, leaving the imperial capital down below. He had spotted Constant Magic Academy in the distance.

The school was made up of a few buildings located within a vast forest. The main school building, with two especially magnificent spires, was glittering white in the sun.

"You probably already know this, but the academy was created from a fortress used during the great war with the demon king one hundred years ago. The old school building is really nothing more than a fortress and it still has dozens of kilometers of passageways underground. Now they are like a giant underground labyrinth. People have disappeared down there, so be careful."

"I will. In fact, I intend to live a life with no need for danger. I came here to learn. I intend to reform the world for the better, so I need to learn at the best possible school."

"Reform the world?"

Junko's eyes glittered with interest.

"I want to become one of the high priests that design society," said Akuto.

"Oh!" uttered Junko in admiration. "I've never heard someone actually say that before. Even though the gods supposedly see all actions that go against them, no one is punished for those actions. However, no matter which sect you enter, you cannot break any taboo at all if you wish to be a high priest."

"I know that," replied Akuto carelessly.

Junko looked back at him with a wide-eyed stare. She must have decided from his expression that he was not joking because she gave a large nod.

"Even littering along the road can be an obstacle to becoming a high priest. You have to be truly prepared. I do not know which faith you belong to, but if that is what you truly wish to do, I will help you."



"I would appreciate that. I get the feeling school life here will present some challenges."

—It looks like you get on oddly well with someone if you hold similar values. Even with the opposite sex.

Akuto reached out for a handshake, but Junko raised her hand as if to

deny him. Instead, she smiled and pulled a short sword out of her uniform.

"In our sect, we have a ritual for binding friendship between equals. We both hold the knife and clack the guard against the scabbard."

"What a wonderful custom."

"You really think so? It confirms one's friendship by creating a situation where you could betray and stab each other with no recourse."

"I like that kind of tension."

Akuto wrapped his hand around Junko's hand on the knife. Junko used her other hand to grab the hilt and lift it up. She then brought it down to create a dry clacking noise.

"This is only the most minor symbol of friendship, but it is the first time I have done it with a boy," said Junko.

"I'm honored. This is the first time I have ever met anyone like you. I sense something noble in you," replied Akuto honestly.

"I'll blush if you compliment me like that. Recently, there have been fewer proper students and people who act out of a sense of justice or a desire to help others are only laughed at. That must be why we feel such an understanding between us."

"I'm surprised to hear there are a lot of students here who do not take this seriously."

"The academy traditionally provides a lot of freedom. That is not a bad thing in and of itself. It provides experiences that will be useful later in life. However, some students play games with magic in the name of experiments they claim are needed to exterminate the monsters underground and in the forest. All of us class representatives have a difficult job. We even have to supervise the dorms. It is only during the long breaks that we can let down our guard."

As Junko spoke exhaustedly, a cruel smile appeared on Akuto's lips.

"Is that why you forgot your luggage?"

"You idiot, don't tease me," snapped back Junko as she blushed. But then she suddenly began fidgeting while looking up at Akuto. "Um... Could you...keep that a secret...at school? People see me as a strict class representative."

"Don't worry. I will not betray you."

The flying bus slipped onto the roof of the main school building.

When Akuto stepped off of the bus, he felt grass beneath his feet. The vast roof was covered entirely in green. Not only did it function as a bus stop, but it was also a sports ground and a rest area. He spotted the entrance down into the building on the edge of that rooftop plaza. It was a large gate with a bird and cherry blossom design on it.

“A lot of people fly in to the roof, so a second main entrance is prepared here,” said Junko while pointing at the gate. “No one else is here, so I’ll say it: Welcome to Constant Magic Academy.”

Part 2

They walked through the blowing wind and entered the school. Akuto's heart leapt as the stone staircase caused their footsteps to reverberate throughout the area.

"You need to get to the infirmary, right? I need to go to my classroom, so we will part ways here. Even if we end up in different classes, contact me tomorrow," said Junko as she pulled her student handbook. "Once you receive your student handbook, you can bring up a mana communication console on the last page. There's a trick to telepathic communication, but you'll catch on quickly. Just search for my name."

The final page of her student handbook was completely black, but glowing writing appeared when she stroked her finger across it. When she flicked some of that writing, a list of names appeared.

"Once you get used to it, you can control it just by thinking, but if you do not use this tool as an intermediary, you will scatter mana around and allow others to listen in to the conversation. Be careful about that. Goodbye."

After that simple explanation, Junko continued down the stairs.

—I don't think this is love, but I enjoy being around her. I feel like I am being rewarded for all of my effort. This is the first time I have felt that my words are getting through to someone and this is the first time I have entered into a friendship with an equal. Luck must finally be turning in my direction.

While thinking that, Akuto followed a route prepared for new students and finally arrived in front of an infirmary where a dozen or so other students stood in a group.

"You are Sai Akuto-kun, right?" asked a woman wearing a white coat over a suit who stood in the center of the dozen or so students. Data on Akuto had been projected onto her large round glasses and she checked off his name on the memo pad in her hand. "Just on time. That is all of the new students. I am Torii Mitsuko. I work as a school doctor, but I am also a teacher, so some of you may take lessons from me. The others will see me whenever you are not feeling well. Oh, but then I suppose you would not want to see me if you could help it, would you?"

Mitsuko-sensei was tall and had messy hair. She smiled innocently as she spoke, which made her appear sociable and easy to get along with.

"However, this school gets a lot of serious injuries. You should learn this soon enough on your own, but this school is filled with more adventures than any other. It is filled with all sorts of strange things to help you research magic rather than help you study. I am sure you will all have times when you want to go and adventure, but try not to be too reckless because healing you can be difficult."

Mitsuko-sensei opened the door to the infirmary and everyone walked inside.

Akuto was the only new student who was not a foreigner. Most of them had a similar skin color to Akuto, so they were likely from the center of the continent. In addition, some had black skin and some had blonde hair

and blue eyes. The material Akuto had been given on the academy had stated that about 15 percent of the students were foreign.

The infirmary was much larger than the one in his old middle school. A gym-sized space was divided into several booths. Some were rooms with beds lined up in them and some were rooms in which surgery was performed. Currently, some people were undergoing treatment administered by other school doctors. Some were moaning in pain and Mitsuko-sensei began her explanation while glancing over towards them.

"We have never had enough deaths to even bother counting, so do not worry. Now, about the physical examination. Come sit in this seat when I call your name."

Mitsuko-sensei pointed at a large wooden chair in the corner of the room. The back of the chair was large enough to envelop anyone of normal height and the armrests were situated quite high. A tall cylindrical glass container was located on the side of the chair. The glass cylinder was faintly glowing.

"There is an artificial spirit in there which will check your physical health. It does not take long and it does not hurt. More importantly, the spirit will predict your future occupation."

Akuto and the other new students all looked puzzled.

Mitsuko-sensei gave a proud snort.

"This is a crystallization of the empire's magical technology. It uses your

personality, how you have lived your life so far, your intelligence, and your physical ability to decide what occupation you should take. You came to this school, so I am sure you all hope to take an occupation that is important to this country. However, this will tell you what specific position that will be. This is not a fortune telling. It is more like advice on what occupation to take based on your personality and abilities. By the way, not a single person has taken an occupation different from what was predicted. Nervous? Don't worry. Merely getting into this school shows you are plenty skilled, so most everyone ends up in the occupation they want."

After hearing that, the new students looked relieved.

—I see. So this is like our official duty upon entering the school.

That was how Akuto viewed it.

"Okay, let's begin."

Mitsuko-sensei called the first student's name.

The nervous-looking boy sat in the chair and a black crow-like bird appeared in the glass cylinder. The bird opened its mouth and spoke in a calm male voice.

"Welcome. I am the artificial spirit Yatagarasu. According to my contract, I will be taking in your personal information and providing advice for your future. New student #001: Yo Lanlee. No health problems. Future occupation...soldier."

The boy's face lit up when he heard the word 'soldier'. It must have been exactly what he wanted.

The new students continued to receive their diagnosis from Yatagarasu one by one. None of them looked displeased with the result. Doctor, diplomat, engineer. They were all important occupations for society and were exactly what the students were hoping to do with their lives. This was similar to having their desired futures promised to them, so every single expression was bright.

Finally, Akuto's name was called. He sat in the chair and looked inside the glass cylinder. Yatagarasu looked at Akuto and spoke.

"New student #021 Sai Akuto. No health problems. Future occupation..."

All of the other new students stared at Akuto in great curiosity. They were interested in what occupation their future schoolmate would have and Akuto was the only new student who was an imperial subject. They all waited expectantly for Yatagarasu to speak.

Yatagarasu's tone remained the same as before, but his unexpected words rang heavily through the room.

His words sounded especially bizarre after all the previous normal responses.

"Demon king."

Question marks appeared on the faces of everyone in the room.

Akuto was no exception. He had no idea what the artificial spirit was saying, so he remained motionless in the chair.

Mitsuko-sensei looked doubtfully over at Yatagarasu.

"What did you say?"

"Future occupation: demon king," repeated Yatagarasu.

He was an artificial spirit, so his words held no emotion. It was Mitsuko-sensei who grew flustered. She stood up and walked over to the glass cylinder.

"Say that one more time."

"Demon king. The common name for the ruler of monsters. As an occupation, demon king refers to the person who will be the most powerful destructive force against society."

Only after hearing those calm words did Akuto understand what was being said about him.

"Wh-what?"

He could only think it was a joke.

"Y-you stay seated. Once more. Diagnose him once more."

After quieting Akuto, Mitsuko-sensei approached Yatagarasu.

"The diagnosis is accurate. He will become a demon king. Both his character and abilities point in that direction."

The artificial spirit was not worried in the slightest. Mitsuko-sensei put her right thumb in her right ear. She was using magic to speak telepathically. She was not speaking out loud, but Akuto understood that she was contacting a specialist with the system.

After a short pause, Mitsuko-sensei took her finger out of her ear.

"Y-you will probably be retested. Don't worry. It's okay. Once you are retested, you will get a normal result. Th-the rest of you do not need to worry either. That is all for today. The opening ceremony is tomorrow, so do not be late."

Mitsuko-sensei sent the other new students out of the infirmary. However, they were muttering amongst themselves. Left behind, Akuto was assaulted by intense anxiety telling him this was not good.

—This is definitely going to spread as a rumor. This is very bad. What is going on? This has to be a bad joke. Or is this Yatagarasu on the fritz? No, even if it is, the rumor will still spread. I have to do something...

His thoughts spun around and around in his head.

Mitsuko-sensei turned towards Akuto with a stiff expression.

"At any rate, I have contacted the headmaster. Please wait in my office until he gets back to me."

Part 3

Akuto could only think it had been a bad dream. He spent a long, uncomfortable time in Mitsuko-sensei's office next to the infirmary before the headmaster finally contacted them.

A mana screen opened above the desk and displayed an old man whose face was covered by a white beard. He looked like a white fur ball growing from a 1000-year-old tree, so Akuto could not even guess at his age. That old man suddenly spoke in a sociable tone of voice.

"It would seem that you are destined to become the next demon king."

"Eh?" replied Akuto, forgetting that he was speaking with the headmaster.

"The demon king. You are destined to replace the same being who ignited the war that took place 100 years ago. Yes, that was a difficult time. Ha ha ha."

The headmaster gave a dry laugh.

"If you understand what all this means, then please explain it to me. What do you mean by demon king?"

"A demon king is a man who rebels with the intention of destroying society," carelessly explained the headmaster.

"But...that is not an occupation, is it? Why are you saying I will become one? And if you know I will become one, surely you can put together some form of countermeasure."

Akuto desperately argued his case, but the headmaster only gave another dry laugh.

"That is a 100-year-old lesson. Back when advances in magic first allowed us to determine people's destinies, we had to decide whether to take countermeasures against those destinies. I chose to not do so. Or rather, I chose to let live those who would harm others. We monitor them, but they are free to do as they wish. Until the moment they commit a crime, of course. So it may be that you will become a threat in the future. You may even start a war or slaughter all those around you, but until then, you are a student of my school. I believe everyone should work to ensure you do not become the demon king, but no one knows what will actually happen."

He was much more talkative than his appearance suggested. But no matter how cheerful his tone was, the words themselves held heavy meaning. He was saying Akuto would likely become someone who harms others, but that they would do nothing until it actually happens.

"That can't be..."

Akuto was almost at a loss for words, but he did understand the reasoning behind it. In fact, he would have readily accepted the decision had it been about someone other than him.

"Your personality and abilities match perfectly to being a demon king.

However, you will likely run into a fair bit of trouble from now on."

The headmaster almost seemed to be enjoying himself, but the word "trouble" bothered Akuto.

"What do you mean by trouble?"

"Many of our students can be rather hot-blooded. Basically, I am saying you might be attacked at any moment."

"You have got to be joking."

Akuto shuddered. The students of this school would certainly attack with magic.

The headmaster seemed to have something to say regarding Akuto's expression.

"If you wish, I can request that the government sends you a bodyguard for your school life."

"A bodyguard?"

"Yes, a bodyguard. Although they would double as an observer. They would stay by your side as a student. But only if you wish for it."

—I see. That does make sense... But then I would be monitored 24/7.

"What if I decline the offer?"

"The academy will do all we can, but you will not have a normal school life."

"I feel like I am being threatened..."

"If you see it that way, you can try it out on your own for now. If you feel the need later, just tell me."

"That sounds best," replied Akuto.

The screen disappeared and Mitsuko-sensei brought her hands to her hips and sighed while watching Akuto.

"Yatagarasu gave me the data used to determine you becoming the demon king, but there is so much data only an artificial spirit can process it all. And this data might not even be completely accurate either..."

Mitsuko-sensei suddenly grabbed Akuto's hand.

Akuto was startled, but he could see a serious look in her eyes through her glasses.

—I see. So she's worried about me.

As he felt a bit moved by that, she began speaking in an earnest tone.

"I am sure you will face difficult times. This will already have spread as a rumor, so you will gather attention as someone special. I am sure you will be harassed. It may take the form of bullying so harsh you may consider committing suicide or students burning with a sense of justice attempting to assassinate you! After all, some will think it is perfectly okay to kill the boy who will become the demon king. But directly killing you would be a crime. Yes, I am certain the murder will be carried out in some ingenious way that even a god would have a hard time telling apart from an accident. You might be assigned adventures with the assumption you will not come back alive or some students may hide your belongings and spread embarrassing photos of you around the world to push you to suicide."

Mitsuko-sensei's passionate speech gradually veered in an odd direction. A burning flame could be seen within her eyes.

"Um... Why do you keep talking about me being killed or committing suicide?"

"Do not worry! If you die, I will use necromancy to bring you back as a spirit of the dead. Even if that only preserves a map of your personality, your data will remain! Fully analyzing the data of the person destined to become the demon king would be an amazing asset for a researcher, don't you think? Oh, and I am not thinking at all that having you survive would be problematic as the data would change day by day. I do not want you to die in the slightest. So don't worry! If you want to die, just come discuss it with me!"

—Not if you get this enthusiastic about it...

Akuto decided Mitsuko-sensei was not the type to keep much hidden below the surface. He could only imagine his troubles with her would only progress. She certainly did not appear to be helpful.

He shook off Mitsuko-sensei who clearly wanted to say more, left the main school building that was thankfully empty, and headed to the dorm using the instructions on the papers he had been given as a new student.

The dorm was just as large as the school building and almost looked like a castle in and of itself. The academy had been a fortress in the past, so the students stayed in the knight garrison. The academy ran on the boarding system, so almost every student lived in their dorms. The castle was divided between east and west. One half was the boys' dorm and the other was the girls'. As soon as one passed through the gate, the dorm mother's room and a reception window were located directly to the side. The rumor must not have spread here yet because the fairly old dorm mother handed him his room key and gave a short explanation of the rules without issue. He then fled to his room without meeting anyone else. As a new student, his room was at the very end of the first floor.

The simple room had only a bed, a desk, a closet, and a storage space up high, but he felt he could live comfortably in it. A student handbook and a folded uniform had been placed on top of the desk.

He sat on the bed and sighed.

"Demon king..."

He still could not believe it. Despite the standard image one had of a

“demon king”, it was common knowledge that the demon king had been a real person who had attempted to overthrow society. His identity was unknown, but the government had announced that he had been a dangerous magician who had started a war while ruling over monsters.

Monsters were still known to exist, but it seemed doubtful they held enough intelligence to be ruled over by a human. Akuto knew very little about what kind of creatures monsters had been back then. He had only heard they were similar to the demons from fairy tales. It did seem “something” had changed in society after that incident just as the headmaster had said, but events from one hundred years in the past did not feel real to Akuto.

However, the impression people had of the demon king would never fade away or diversify. And that was especially true in this academy where students were taught magic. The demon king was the symbol of evil and black magic, so their feelings about him had to be complicated at the very least.

That meant Mitsuko-sensei’s warnings were not just due to her desire for data. However, he expected more fear and hostility than harassment.

—But I have always tried to do good. I have never consciously done anything bad. There is no way I will become the demon king. If I show that in my actions, everyone is sure to understand. First impressions are important. The popular members of my old class specialized in sociable jokes and small talk. If I give a proper introduction, they are sure to realize that no demon king would introduce himself like that.

Akuto began simulating his introduction.

—Nice to meet you. I am sure you have all heard the rumors, but apparently I am supposed to become the demon king in the future. However, I think I would rather be a monkey than a de-monkey-ng.

—No, that's no good...

—That sounds way too stupid. I'm not good at making jokes... I take everything too seriously. I can't do it even to save my chances of a normal life in high school...

—But then what am I supposed to do? I guess I have to keep it serious. I will speak my mind and actively work to help the school. I know. How about I nominate myself as the cleaning officer? No one wants to do that kind of annoying job. And that will also allow the teacher to quickly learn who I am.

After finishing that mental one-man conversation, Akuto felt relieved. And then an announcement was broadcast through the dorm.

<<It is time for dinner. Please gather in the dining hall.>>

When Akuto entered the dining hall, he immediately realized the situation had progressed in a delicate direction more quickly than he had expected. The dining hall contained three long tables big enough to seat 200 people each. Every student gathered there seemed to be holding each other in check while searching for any unfamiliar faces who would be the new students. However, the atmosphere was not that of welcoming in some new students. It felt more like an isolated mansion in a snowy mountain after someone had been murdered.

—This is bad...

Akuto tried to look calm as he sat at the end of one of the tables. The primary difference from a mansion murder mystery was that all of the new students knew who the future demon king was. The other students gradually realized who it was all the new students were looking at.

"He doesn't look violent."

"No, it's the intellectual type who can be truly cruel."

"He does look clever."

Akuto could hear students whispering amongst themselves. This was quite a shock to him and he found it impossible to endure. However, his personality did not allow him to simply grow depressed. After seeing that everyone had seated, he banged on the table and stood up.

"I would like to introduce myself to my new classmates and upperclassmen. My name is Sai Akuto. I am the rumored new student who Yatagarasu diagnosed as a future demon king!"

All of the students gathered in the dining hall began murmuring at the sudden affirmation of the rumor. Akuto raised his voice, but his voice was not reaching the far end of the large dining hall. That was when a smart but mischievous looking boy sitting nearby quickly raised his right hand and called out "Speaker!" An artificial creature that looked like a camera with wings flew into the dining hall and stopped above Akuto's head.

That artificial creature's face (or what Akuto assumed was its face given the position of its wings) was turned towards Akuto. He saw something like a camera lens there. The rear end of the creature had a similar lens-like device that glowed and projected an image of Akuto near the ceiling.

Akuto looked over at the mischievous-looking student and the boy gave him a thumbs-up.

"It does indeed seem I am predicted to become a demon king and it seems these diagnoses have never been wrong in the past!"

As Akuto continued speaking, his voice was amplified.

—I really didn't think this through...

He began to regret this, but it was too late to turn back now. Leaving things vague here would leave the others with a poor impression of him. His personality did not let him finish without saying what he intended to say.

—Well, whatever

"However, I wish to question that very system of examination. Does that really decide our destinies? Are we not simply accepting that as our path in life after hearing that prediction? It is true the gods watch over our personalities and the way we have lived our lives and that data is used in this prediction. However, humans are not restricted to a single possibility! Do we not need to escape that preconceived notion? If we do not, our

world can never advance!"

His audience began to notice that this was well organized for an impromptu speech. At first, they had been heckling him, but the dining hall gradually fell silent as everyone began focusing on listening to Akuto's words.

Akuto raised his voice further, "I shall accept your inquisitive gazes. However, I must criticize the fact that none of you attempted to ask me directly as to the truth of the matter! Was that not because you gave in to your fear? What if I had truly been someone who would become demon king? Or did you think it would negatively impact you to be seen with me? Avoiding someone without confirming the truth leads to one-sided discrimination! You should be ashamed of that fear. Many commoners view those learned in magic as a superior race. Magic is not meant to show the superiority of the individual, yet this erroneous thinking shall continue as long as you continue thinking of yourselves as elites! And it shall continue as long as diagnosing one's future occupation is so prevalent!"

Only after getting a bit carried away with his speech did Akuto start to have some internal doubts.

—Is it just me or am I criticizing the system this school runs on as well as the country's magical policies?

The students had all entered this top-rate school, so all of them had surely noticed this as well. One of them must have had some experience with the data on the past demon king because someone whispered, "Isn't this almost identical to the demon king's declaration of war 100 years ago?"

—W-what!?

Akuto may have gotten carried away, but he had been speaking his honest feelings. He had never thought that would have this result. And the fact that these words had come off the cuff seemed to be having a negative effect.

“That’s way too good for an unscripted speech.”

“He moved me for an instant and I thought he was right...but this criticism of the structure of society is way too dangerous.”

“He has the talents of a demon king...”

“He’s the reincarnation of the demon king...”

Akuto could clearly hear those muttered comments.

—This is dangerous. I am in an extremely dangerous situation here. It always works out like this. I am only trying to do what I think is right, so why does this happen?

Akuto lamented, but he was not aware that he was a very persuasive speaker thanks to his pointlessly clever-looking and handsome face and the groundless self-confidence his argumentative personality gave him. Partially due to his secret desire not to look bad in front of everyone, he did not even think about the possibility of simply ending his speech here.

“Yes, I am criticizing the structure of society. However, that does not mean I intend to destroy it! I have entered this academy so that I can change that structure from within! I wish to prove that I am not a demon king by doing so! I hope you will help me with this! Even if you try to oppose me, I will not confront you. If we talk it out and learn to get along, I am sure we can find an answer!”

At some point, his tone had changed from a polite one to the forceful tone of a dictator’s speech. Akuto was motioning wildly with his hands and speaking so passionately his hair was thrown into disarray. Some of the students listening were briefly entranced by him, but as soon as he stopped speaking, they shook their heads and slapped their cheeks to bring themselves back to reality.

The more of an impact his speech had given, the more deeply the meaning of his words would be engraved in their hearts. However, his speech could be interpreted to mean the following:

I don’t know if I will be a demon king or not, but I mean to place myself in the center of this school’s system to spread my way of thinking.

Naturally, Sai Akuto understood this is what he had ultimately said.

—Can I really get by in this school after this? ...But looking weak now would only make this worse.

“That is all I wish to say. I apologize for disturbing you. Now, let’s get to dinner.”

Akuto tried to speak as gently as possible, but those around him viewed it as the composure of a corrupt noble.

"Is that any way for a new student to act? And a first year at that."

"He definitely is no normal person."

"What should we do? This could turn into a conflict that divides the entire school."

"I doubt anyone would actually join his side."

"But if he has talent in magic or..."

The commotion in the dining hall showed no sign of calming down. With everyone focused on him, Akuto could only nervously straighten his back and eat while following every code of etiquette. Later, he could not remember what he had eaten or what it had tasted like.

Part 4

The next morning, Akuto awoke after a nearly sleepless night. Breakfast was oddly quiet and tense, but he endured somehow. Afterwards, everyone walked to their classes for the homeroom period before the opening ceremony. Akuto entered his classroom five minutes before homeroom began and all the girls stared at him curiously as soon as he walked in the door.

—That's right. There are girls here too.

The rumor would have naturally spread to the girls as well. It was possible the image from that "speaker" had been played in the girls' dorm as well. In fact, it must have for all the girls to immediately recognize him.

—I need to stay composed and smile back.

"Good morning," he said.

This was met with voices that were not quite coquettish and not quite disgusted. It seemed about half of them viewed him favorably and about half viewed him negatively.

However, Akuto's eyes were fixed on one girl in particular. This beautiful girl had glossy hair and almond-shaped eyes. It was Junko. Akuto finally recalled which class he had been assigned to.

—This is Class A. Oh, I completely forgot I promised to contact her.

Junko seemed to be intentionally avoiding meeting Akuto's gaze. None of the others were asking her about him, so she must have kept it a secret that they had met the day before.

—Oh, dear...

Akuto did not want to cause any trouble for Junko, so he pretended not to know her. He avoided looking anyone in the eye as he walked to the seat in the very back that had been prepared for him. As soon as he sat down, the classroom door opened and Mitsuko-sensei entered.

"Okay, everyone to your seats. I, Torii Mitsuko, will be your homeroom teacher this year as well. I had most of you in middle school, but it is nice to meet those I did not. I tend not to bother going down every name for attendance. As for today...Oh, Soga-san is absent again. She's probably asleep somewhere like usual. Someone go call for her." With that offhand comment, Mitsuko-sensei closed her attendance notebook and looked towards Junko. "That just leaves deciding on our class representative, but with mostly the same faces, I assume I can just ask Hattori Junko-san."

Junko started to nod in agreement, but someone else cut in.

"Sensei! Choosing a class representative without a vote creates a dictatorship and prevents us from advancing!"

That voice gave Akuto a very bad feeling. This person was copying his own tone of voice from his speech the night before. He looked over to a

seat diagonally in front of him and found exactly who he expected. The same boy who had called in the “speaker” was giving Akuto a thumbs-up with a mischievous expression.

“I nominate Sai Akuto-kun for class rep! We all heard his speech and I think helping us all out as class rep will help him prove he will not become the demon king!”

The entire class was now muttering to each other.

“Quiet down, everyone,” said Mitsuko-sensei while clapping her hands together.

Akuto looked over at Junko without thinking. She looked away, but he caught a glimpse of her expression. He had expected anger, but he found the look of someone desperately trying to endure a bottomless disgrace.

—Suhara followers feel great pride in their official positions, so this involves her faith as well...

Akuto panicked. Junko was supposed to be his first friend and yet he had now betrayed her several times over.

He raised his hand and said, “Sensei, don’t I get a say? I step down. Instead, um...I would like to be the class janitor. If you have one here.”

Mitsuko-sensei’s expression had remained cheerful so far, but it suddenly stiffened when he said that.

The atmosphere of the class changed all at once. The class had already been in a strange mood, but this announcement plunged the atmosphere below the freezing point.

"Wait...Sai-kun..." Mitsuko-sensei finally spoke. "Do you understand what you are saying?"

"What?"

Akuto had no idea what was happening. He could not imagine why the classroom had grown so tense.

Mitsuko-sensei gave an explanation while sounding as if this was something too filthy to put into words.

"The class janitor is the student who 'cleans up' all of the students and the academy's secrets if those secrets can no longer be protected during a war with monsters or another country. In other words, that student is in charge of destruction and execution. The position has never been filled since the end of the war, but the name still exists in the records. It is considered too abominable to even mention."

—What the hell!?

Akuto could not believe his bad luck. He had unwittingly hit on the worst possible term to use.

"You don't understand. I just wasn't interested in any of the other positions," he said without thinking, and the class froze over even further. "No, that isn't what I-..."

He trailed off because no one was listening.

Junko stood up while raising her voice almost to a shout.

"Sai Akutoooo! You toyed with my heart!"

Junko glared at Akuto with a horrific expression and disheveled hair.

Akuto did not blame her for being angry, but...

—Saying it like that is only going to make this worse.

Akuto grew oddly calm. Just as he feared, the entire class appeared to have made some sort of misunderstanding. They looked back and forth between Akuto and Junko.

"I thought I told you our vow could only be repaid in blood if it was broken!"

Junko pulled a wooden sword from beside her desk.

—Using the word "vow" will only make the class think we had some sort of relationship as a boy and a girl... That misunderstanding will hurt

Hattori-san once she cools her head and can think straight.

"You say 'our vow', but we are not talking about a lifelong marriage here. It was nothing more than a bit of good-natured fun on an empty bus," said Akuto.

The class seemed to accept his correction oddly well.

—Uh, oh.

Akuto finally realized his error, but it was too late.

Junko was so angry she seemed to give off a red aura from her entire body as she pointed her wooden sword towards Akuto. The sword was a magical item, an artifact, so the light wrapped around it was a torrent of mana, not an illusion.

"S-s-such humiliation! I challenge you to a duel! Right here and now!"

Junko pulled another wooden sword from next to her desk. (A great number of them were contained in a bag hanging from the side of her desk.) She threw it hilt-first at Akuto. He instinctually caught it, but could only look over at Mitsuko-sensei for guidance.

"She is a Suhara follower. Religious duels are allowed under the school rules," said the teacher with a cold expression.

She too seemed to view Akuto as an enemy of women everywhere.

“The winner gets to be class rep!” announced a mischievous boy behind Akuto with an excited expression. He tapped on Akuto’s shoulder and whispered to him with a look of respect. “My name’s Miwa Hiroshi. You can call me Hiroshi! I’ll call you aniki! Aniki, you’re amazing! I’m treated like a delinquent because of my bad grades, but your ideals really got through to me! I feel like I could become anything I set my mind to!”

—Isn’t most of this your fault?

However, Akuto did not have time to focus on him.

“Haahhhhhhhhh!”

With that shout of exertion, Junko’s attack flew towards Akuto.

“Wah!”

Akuto was still sitting, but he managed to avoid it by falling backwards in his seat. The strength and reflexes he had built up with his delivery job had paid off.

“Okay, this is dangerous. Stay back, everyone,” instructed Mitsuko-sensei while clapping twice.

Everyone in the class except for Junko and Akuto lined up along the classroom wall. Mitsuko-sensei clapped once more and a mana field enveloped Junko and Akuto. This seemed to be Mitsuko-sensei’s magic.

They no longer needed to worry about damaging anything outside that field.

—I am in serious trouble. I need to break free of this situation somehow... I have to calm Hattori-san.

Akuto looked at Junko. With the red anger blazing in her eyes, it was obvious she was not going to listen.

“Chaahhhh!”

The second strike came. He jumped back to avoid it.

“Aniki, go for it!”

Akuto heard Hiroshi cheering him on from outside.

This only frustrated him further.

—The only way to calm Hattori-san down...

Akuto thought frantically, but only a simple idea came to mind.

—...is this!

“Ryaahhh!”

Just as Junko let the third strike fly, Akuto stepped forward for some reason.

Junko's wooden sword shot straight for the top of Akuto's head. The instant before it seemed his head would be smashed, Akuto twisted his body to the side and out of the way while continuing forward. Akuto advanced past the guard of Junko's sword.

"What!?"

Surprise replaced the anger in Junko's eyes.

The entire class was staring at Junko and Akuto.

A commotion filled the classroom like an earthquake.

Akuto managed to embrace Junko's body from the front. Their two bodies joined together like the embrace of two lovers after a long separation.

"Calm down," Akuto whispered in Junko's ear.

"Ah!"

Whether she was ticklish or reacting to the actual problem at hand, Junko jerked backwards and almost fell to the ground. Akuto reached his arm around her waist to support her, which only strengthened the image

that he was coming in for a kiss.

"Wh-what are you doing? Let go of me..." groaned Junko.

"I will not let go until this misunderstanding has been cleared up," said Akuto with a deadly serious expression.

"What misunderstanding? You have humiliated me so much...and are continuing to do so... I have never felt such disgrace!"

"This is all a misunderstanding. I have had nothing but good intentions and never meant to humiliate you."

"R-really...?"

Junko seemed to have calmed down a bit because she was actually listening to him now.

Feeling a bit relieved, Akuto continued speaking gently.

"Really. So let us return to the relationship we had. I made that promise because I had taken a liking to you. That was not a decision I made lightly."

However, the rest of the class could hear his words.

Junko and Akuto finally realized what their position looked like to an

outside observer.

"Wow... That's a demon king for you..."

"He defeated that straight-laced Hattori Junko who's said to be the strongest of the class reps... Or should I say he had her fall for him."

"Looks to me like he had already done that before today."

Everyone in the class was muttering to each other.

Junko's face grew beet red in an instant.

"This is exactly what I was talking about! How much must you humiliate me!?" shouted Junko.

She twisted her body around to move away from Akuto and swung her wooden sword down at him with all her strength. Akuto's pose did not allow him to evade it.

"Watch out!"

Realizing he could not avoid the blow, Akuto swung up his own wooden sword. Even if he could not evade the blow, he could block it. He poured all his strength into the one hand to brace for the coming impact.

And...

A power Akuto had never even imagined existed was born within his right arm. He felt a mass of gathered heat travel from his arm and fill the wooden sword.

—Not good!

Despite that reflexive thought, he could not stop the power from surging out. Just as he thought the heat would be released through the sword, light exploded in the space between Junko and Akuto's swords.

Pure white light filled the center of the classroom. The explosion of light easily broke through the mana field Mitsuko-sensei had set up and flowed outside.

"Get down!" shouted Mitsuko-sensei with a look of shock.

An explosive blast and explosive noise filled the classroom.

Miraculously, no one was injured. However, all four walls of the classroom had been blown away. Junko and Akuto stood blankly in the center of the students who were covered by ash and rubble.

Word of the incident spread throughout the entire school in the blink of an eye. This became how the entire student body viewed Akuto.

Chapter 2: The Strange Observer

Part 1

"Um, you did nothing wrong. You were challenged to a duel and fought back," said Mitsuko-sensei from directly in front of Akuto in the infirmary.

"But I didn't actually fight back..."

"On the record, you did. Otherwise, you would be charged for the repairs to the classroom. Um, do you not actually understand what happened?" asked Mitsuko-sensei awkwardly.

Just as she said, Akuto had no idea what had happened. He scratched his head in bewilderment and she continued.

"Mana fills the air and various effects are produced by moving it. Energy is pumped into the earth itself from the power generation facility in the center of the imperial capital and the mana resonates with it. That is why mana is often thought to be the same as energy. Of course this is all just the basics of magic."

Even Akuto knew that much.

"However, the rest is what students come to this school to learn, so you wouldn't know. Mana can be stored within the bodies of living beings which allows them to draw out energy. Think of it like using up calories. The amount of mana stored within someone varies from person to person. The more mana inside your body, the greater the effect when using the mana in the atmosphere. A human's will is transferred via electrical impulses in the brain, those electrical impulses manipulate the

mana in the body, and the external mana resonates with it. That is how magic works. That is also why some people simply have more natural talent with magic. A stronger will controlling those electrical impulses and a greater amount of mana in the body leads to greater talent. This is not a secret, but most normal people go their whole lives without learning about it."

"So I caused that explosion?"

"You catch on quickly. That wooden sword was made to harden itself when mana is gathered in it, but you gathered too much mana which caused it to be released in an explosion."

"Does that mean I used an unexpected amount of mana? Or at least more than that sword was meant to take?"

"Yes. And remember that you broke through my field as well. I am not a teacher in this school for nothing. I was said to have talent that comes along only once a decade. I never thought I would lose to a student, but... here we are. Your ability seems to be off the charts."

Mitsuko-sensei laughed good-naturedly, but not just because of her personality. It seemed Akuto really did have an unbelievable amount of power.

"It is amazing no one was injured. It seems you subconsciously controlled the energy released from the sword. But..."

"But it might not go so well next time?" continued Akuto with a sigh.

"Yes. The students here get into a lot of fights, so I am worried what will happen if you get into a fight."

"I have no intention of getting into any fights...but I doubt it will be that easy."

Even if he did not want any trouble, someone was sure to pick a fight with him. Especially Junko. Akuto felt depressed.

"Fights will be almost unavoidable. You need to grow as a human being while also learning to control your magical power."

Mitsuko-sensei fell silent as if waiting for a response from Akuto. Guessing what she wanted, Akuto nodded.

"Understood. Please call in the observer," he said with a sigh.

According to the headmaster, this person would observe Akuto in his school life. However, they would also protect him.

—Nothing is going according to plan...

Akuto sighed again.

After Mitsuko-sensei contacted someone, she told him the observer would arrive the following day.

"This may be a harsh way of putting it, but try not to cause any trouble until this observer arrives. If anything happens before then, just contact me."

Mitsuko-sensei entered her address into Akuto's student handbook.

"Also," she added as her eyes suddenly began glittering. "Could you sign this saying I can research on your body if you die?"

"Not a chance."

Part 2

Akuto returned to the dorm filled with exasperation, but he found no respite there. As soon as he stepped inside, Hiroshi ran over and bowed down so far it looked like he was going to lick Akuto's shoes.

"W-wait, Miwa-kun..."

"C'mon, aniki! Call me Hiroshi!"

Hiroshi led Akuto into the dorm while taking on the role of an outrider.

"Outta the way! Clear a pathway for the future demon king!"

Hiroshi began threatening the gathering students.

—I-I need to do something about him...

"Hey, could you stop that?"

Hiroshi looked utterly shocked when he turned around.

"Wh-why, aniki!?"

"You shouldn't scare them."

"O-oh, I get it! I thought you wanted to rule with fear, but I should have known better! You intend to gradually take hold of the students' hearts!"

—If I was trying to do that, you would be ruining it by shouting about it in front of everyone...

"Th-that's not it. At any rate, stop treating me like someone special."

"So you plan to conquer this academy after starting from the same standpoint as everyone else!"

Hiroshi's eyes were glittering and his breathing was erratic.

—Conquer...?

Akuto was confused, but he pushed his question aside and spoke more forcefully to Hiroshi.

"I want to live a normal life here, so I need people to treat me normally. I already stand out, so I want you to stop threatening-..."

Akuto trailed off because someone suddenly shouted out down the passageway.

"Are you the one that destroyed a classroom today!?"

Two students were walking towards Akuto. Out of the corner of his eye,

Akuto spotted the look on Hiroshi's face completely changing when he saw them.

—This is why I told you to stop this...

The two boys were large and had the distinct rebellious expressions of elite school delinquents. They did not look like nice people, but Akuto was in no position to talk because his expressions could look just as rebellious.

"Sorry about the trouble. It was an accident," said Akuto.

The two of them began laughing.

"Sorry about the trouble?" They mockingly imitated his voice and stared him in the eye. "Anyone with half a brain can blow up a classroom, so don't get so full of yourself."

—Ugh, what a pain in the ass. Why do people spend so much time worrying about nonsense like "honor"? Why are people this stupid allowed to live? They should feel ashamed about all the oxygen they waste breathing.

That was Akuto's honest opinion. And Akuto tended not to think of the consequences when something irritated him too badly.

"Then tomorrow you can have a contest to see who can make the biggest explosion. But I want to study in peace, so do it somewhere a long way from here."

The two boys looked a bit confused when Akuto did not falter, but they soon replied with sneers on their faces.

"If you want to study in peace so much, why did you blow up your classroom?"

"People cannot help but hang around popular people. Is that what this is? People are often too embarrassed to just ask for an autograph, so they try to pick a fight instead."

The two boy's expressions changed when they heard Akuto's mockery.

"Don't talk back to us. Don't you know what happens when you do that?"

"Well, there's two of you, so will you put on a manzai act?"

"You bastard!"

The two of them flew into a rage, but they froze in place when Akuto raised his hand.

"A-anyway, just don't get too full of yourself," they said before turning around and running off.

—Am I really acting full of myself? I don't think they know what they want. That sort of pathetic personality will only end up ruled over by

someone else. What would they do if I decided to make them my lackeys?

Akuto quickly realized his thoughts had turned in a dangerous direction. It was a comment from Hiroshi that dragged his thoughts back into reality.

"Amazing, aniki!"

"I told you to stop that..."

"Eh? But those two were upperclassmen."

"I really don't see why we need to bother with that sort of distinction. They've done nothing more than be born a year ahead of us. We should still be polite, of course."

As soon as he said that, Akuto realized "Oh, no!" and looked over at Hiroshi. His face was flushed and he was looking at Akuto with deep respect.

—I see. I felt contempt for the lack of responsibility and sociability in my peers. It showed up in my attitude so now he respects me for it. Even more so since this could have led to violence.

Akuto calmly analyzed the situation, but he still did not understand how he had gotten to this point.

—Was it wrong to focus on nothing but my job and my studies back in

my hometown?

"Well...just leave me alone for now. I will stay in my room until dinner," said Akuto before trying to escape.

"Eh? Don't do that, aniki. I was just about to show you around the dorm and the school," said Hiroshi in disappointment.

Akuto rethought his actions.

—Well, I know now what I was doing wrong, so I should be able to apologize to Hattori-san. She is filled with responsibility and sociability. That is why I took a liking to her. I just need to properly explain my personality to her.

With his thoughts moving in the wrong direction in more ways than one, Akuto spoke to Hiroshi.

"In that case, can you tell me how to get to the girls' dorm? I assume there is an official procedure. I haven't had a chance to apologize to Hattori-san."

Hiroshi clapped his hands together in delight.

"You really are amazing, aniki! I can show you the way to the girls' dorm. No official procedure necessary!"

"Thank you."

"This is getting exciting!"

—Exciting? But we're just going to the girls' dorm.

Akuto was a bit confused at Hiroshi acting like a child before a vacation, but he followed the other boy's lead.

Hiroshi left the dorm and circled around the outer wall. A forest surrounded the building and the pathway must have not been used much because it had no lights set up along it. They walked through the dim evening.

"I thought there was a passageway connecting the two sides."

The boys' dorm and the girls' dorm were contained within the two sides of a fortress and a bridge connected them in the middle.

"You want to visit the class rep's room, right? Going outside is easier," assured Hiroshi with a grin.

"Why?"

"Her room is on the very end of the second floor."

Hiroshi pulled out his student handbook and opened it. The screen displayed a map of the girls' dorm.

"They give out maps of the girls' dorm?"

"Only to the girls."

"Eh?"

"It wasn't easy getting my hands on this. You've probably caught on already, but my information is famous among the guys."

—What is he talking about?

Akuto was confused, but the atmosphere of the dorm's exterior changed as they continued walking. They had entered the territory of the girls' dorm.

"We need to be careful from here on," whispered Hiroshi as he crouched down.

"If we are not supposed to be doing this, then we need to-..."

"Shh!" warned Hiroshi while holding a finger to his mouth.

"I never asked you to sneak me in," explained Akuto frantically.

"But you want to meet the class rep, right? It would cause a huge commotion if you did this the official way!"

Hiroshi grinned as if to say, "I thought this through, didn't I?"

"Yeah...it definitely would," agreed Akuto.

He had a feeling Junko would not accept his apology in front of a crowd.

"Also, the standard method for a guy and a girl meeting in the dorm is for the guy to go to the girl's window."

"I see. That would cause fewer problems than the official method."

"Um, yes... Anyway, that's the window."

Hiroshi pointed up at a window. The window had an overhang around it and the wall had plenty of bricks sticking out, so it looked easy enough to climb up to the window.

"I'm supposed to climb up?"

"Of course, aniki. You can't use flight magic yet, right?" said Hiroshi as if that should be obvious. "When you go to a girl's room, you give the window three quick taps followed by three long knocks."

"So that is how it is done."

Akuto nodded and Hiroshi gave him a push forward.

"Okay. Good luck, aniki!"

"Eh? Oh..."

Akuto was confused, but Hiroshi simply said "go on" and waved him on vigorously.

—What is even going on? ...Well, if that is the custom, I just have to follow it.

Akuto grabbed onto the wall. He easily climbed up to the second-story window. He hesitated before peering inside.

—That would be rude if she is changing...

Instead, he stuck just his hand up and knocked on the window.

He gave three quick taps followed by three long knocks.

After a short pause, the window burst violently open. Despite being to the side of the window, Akuto felt a blast of wind. It almost felt like she had been trying to kill him with the window.

—I suppose she would be angry. I need to give a sincere apology.

But when he saw Junko's rage-filled face stick out the window, he was taken aback by how angry she still was.

"Such humiliation! Damn you! How much disgrace must you bring me!?"

The tone of Junko's voice had gone beyond anger and arrived at lamentation.

"Please wait a second! I came to apologize!"

"If you are here to apologize, why would you use the sign for a lover coming to spend the night!?"

—That's what that three taps and three knocks means!?

Akuto realized what was happening.

"W-wait! I was tricked into thinking that was the proper etiquette!"

"Everyone is already mistaken about us! I lose to you! I am mocked by you! Ahhh!! There is only one thing I can do! I have to defeat you to clear up all these misunderstandings!"

Junko held out her wooden sword.

"I-I'm sorry. I really am! I wasn't trying to-..."

"Then what were you trying to do, demon king!?"

Akuto crawled along the wall of the girls' dorm while evading Junko's sword.

"I already told you! I'm not a demon king!"

"If you want to prove that, then let me defeat you! That would prove you do not have the strength to be a demon king!"

Akuto felt that did make some amount of sense, but he could not allow himself to be thrashed by that wooden sword when it was being wielded with such killer intent.

"This is all a misunderstanding! I really did take a liking to you!"

"Stop saying it like that!" shouted Junko.

Others in the dorm had heard the commotion and windows across the building began opening.

"That's that new student!"

"Oh...Is Junko having a fight with her boyfriend?"

"Is it true they tried to commit a lovers suicide in class?"

The girls began spreading rumors between windows. Akuto realized the situation was beyond repair, so he climbed down the wall.

"Th-this is all a misunderstanding, so I'll come back to apologize after you calm down!"

He looked up at the window just in time to see some pure white underwear. It was the white loincloth only pure-born members of the Suhara faith were allowed to wear.

Junko had jumped from the window with no concern on how it would flip up her skirt.

"Keaaaaaaaaahhhh!"

"Wah!"

Akuto just barely evaded the strike from the sky and fell into the woods behind him.

"C-calm down!"

Akuto ran while avoiding the slashes at his back.

"I refuse to listen to you!"

Definite killer's intent could be felt in how Junko wielded that wooden sword.

—If this keeps up, one of us is going to get hurt...

Akuto recalled what his teacher had told him. She had asked him to contact her in an emergency.

He pulled out his student handbook, quickly pressed his teacher's address with his fingers, and brought the handbook to his cheek.

"Hm? Are you having trouble?"

"Y-yes, sensei! I'm being attacked by Hattori-san!"

"Why were you anywhere near her?" asked Mitsuko-sensei in shock.

"I thought we could work this out!"

"Well, whatever. Do not let go of your student handbook. Your observer just arrived. As long as you have that handbook, the observer can trace your mana and go help you."

"Thank goodness!"

Akuto glanced over his shoulder while gasping for breath.

Junko must have been in good shape because she was easily keeping up with him. Akuto had built up his leg strength in his delivery job, so Junko had to have quite a bit of stamina.

"How long until this observer arrives?"

"I don't know... It should be soon, though. A sensible observer will teleport there," said Mitsuko-sensei before ending the telepathic connection.

"S-sensei..."

Just as Akuto said that, the ground suddenly disappeared from beneath his feet.

"Eh?"

He suddenly felt like he was floating and then like he was falling.

The trees of the forest had hidden an upcoming cliff.

He heard repeated sounds of trees rustling and impacts struck his body along with each noise. Finally, an even greater impact struck his back. For an instant, he stopped breathing and all feelings left his body. Soon afterwards, a dull pain filled his entire body.

Part 3

“Uuh...Kh...”

Akuto groaned and sucked in air while looking around to assess his situation. He seemed to be in a bamboo grove. Beech trees had been growing atop the cliff and bamboo had started growing where they stopped.

—If this bamboo was cut, I might have been impaled. I was lucky. And this helped me escape from Hattori-san. If I just wait, will this observer arrive?

However, Junko would probably find him if he simply stayed where he was. Akuto made sure he had no serious injuries on his arms and legs before heading deeper into the bamboo grove.

—What a pain. But at least this did not develop into anything too serious. Having no one on my side makes everything a lot harder. I hope this observer will change that.

While complaining silently, Akuto walked aimlessly.

Suddenly, he noticed a figure. He could only see the person's silhouette because the setting sun lay directly beyond them.

He initially took a defensive stance, but decided this was not Junko when the figure did not immediately charge at him. When he gave a

relieved sigh, the figure seemed to notice him.

"Who is this that has come to visit me?"

It was a girl's voice. An incredibly carefree girl's voice.

"Actually, who are you? Are you my observer?"

He seriously doubted that was possible, but he received an affirmation.

"Yes. I am your observer."

"I'm saved. You came to meet me, right?" asked Akuto.

The lively girl's voice reverberated throughout the bamboo grove in response.

"Yes, although I do not know if you came to me or I came to you. This must be destiny! Are you my prince? Is your lovely face and body so scratched up because you passed through the forest of thorns to meet me?"

—This observer has an interesting way of putting things. I suppose this academy is something like a forest of thorns for me.

"Yes, I did. This has been a difficult time. I was waiting for you. From your voice, I assume you are a girl, but you will protect me as my

observer, right?"

"You wish for my protection? Yes, I suppose protecting their prince has become the duty of girls in recent years. And I am your observer! I am the one who observes this academy and this entire world. I observe the changing of the seasons and the changes in the people living through those seasons! The flow of history is so entrancing and amazing, don't you think?"

"Does an observer really have to be so poetic?"

—This is really weird...

"Yes, I am an observer. I am your observer."



The observer's voice was so lighthearted it almost seemed she was singing. In fact, she truly did began singing as she walked up to Akuto.

Her long hair fluttered in front of Akuto's eyes. Akuto felt like she had taken a piece of the setting sun with her. Her hair was a brilliant red and a few strands of hair stood up on the top of her head. Those strands shook back and forth like flickering flames.

"Now, my prince, what would you have me do?"

She was wearing the school's uniform. She lifted the skirt up slightly in greeting.

"Could you not call me your prince? Also, I'm in a bit of trouble. You know the situation, right?"

"There is a lot that can describe this situation. What I know is that you are injured and you came to me. That is enough to tell me you are in trouble."

The girl clenched her fist and looked up.

Her expression was surprisingly relaxed for the amount of spirit she was giving this. Her expression was focused, yet it gave off a kind impression. Her face was a bit too gentle to call her beautiful, but she did provide a sense of security and good will. Akuto felt he would grow sleepy if he looked at her face for too long.

"As long as you realize the danger of this-..."

Akuto was cut off by a long shout.

"There you aaaaaarrrrrrreeeeeeee!"

Akuto took up a defensive pose.

"Oh, dear," said the red-haired girl leisurely as she looked between Akuto's expression and where Junko had appeared in the bamboo grove. She finally turned to Akuto with her overly gentle expression. "You're right. That is dangerous. But I will protect you."

—Oh? She doesn't seem concerned.

Akuto had thought something was off about this girl, but he finally began to believe she was his observer.

The girl walked confidently towards Junko. She gallantly held up a magic wand.

"Out of the way, you idiot! What do you think you're doing!?" shouted Junko towards the girl.

The red-haired girl spread her arms and gave a resolute reply.

"I will not move! He is precious to me!"

Her voice was as serious as someone protecting their lover.

Junko's look of anger changed from red to a dark black.

She looked Akuto in the eye and shouted, "Damn you! Do you target every girl you see!?"

"You've got it all wrong! I only just met her here!"

"I know that! I am asking if you seduced this girl you only just met!"

Junko swung up her wooden sword and charged towards Akuto. However, the red-haired girl moved to block her path.

"Out of the way!"

"No!"

Whether she moved to the right or left, Junko found that red-haired girl's face in front of her. Growing even more furious, Junko jumped backwards once and stared straight forward with her sword held vertically.

"Then I must slip past you!"

For an instant, Junko closed her eyes to focus. The instant she reopened them, her body surprisingly split into two.

Akuto could not believe his eyes. It appeared that there were now two identical Junkos. They moved separately as if they were twins rather than reflections.

"This is a type of magic passed down in my family! One of these is a fake, but that fake has the same attack power as the real one!"

The two Junkos ran to the right and left to circle around the red-haired girl.

Akuto was unsure what to do because he did not know how the red-haired girl would respond. One of the two Junkos would undoubtedly slip past her, but he could not plan his defense without knowing which one. Akuto followed the Junkos while keeping the red-haired girl in the corner of his vision.

—This observer is an expert fighter, so she should act first-...Eh?

"Eh? Eh?"

The red-haired girl twisted her head to the left and right in confusion.

Both Junkos slipped past her in no time at all. The two of them sidestepped simultaneously to put themselves in equal distances from either side of Akuto. They were planning to attack with perfectly simultaneous attacks he could not hope to defend against.

"Cheaaaahhh!" "Daaaahhh!"

The two vigorously approached Akuto from both sides.

—Eh? So is she not my observer? Do I have to handle this myself? Then I need to dodge the right one...and defend against the left one!

With that decided, Akuto took up the proper defensive pose. Even with

simultaneous attacks from the left and right, he could predict the path of the coming attacks because Junko's actions were simple ones based on anger.

—If I time it right, I can dodge thi-...Wah!

While trying to judge his timing, Akuto's feet were suddenly knocked out from under him. This "attack" had come from an unexpected direction. The red-haired girl had suddenly embraced him in what essentially amounted to a tackle.

"I'll protect you!"

"Ehhh!?"

This further surprised Akuto, but it was so sudden he could do nothing but collapse to the ground with the red-haired girl.

The two Junkos mercilessly swung down their wooden swords towards where the two lay collapsed in an embrace. There was no avoiding it. Akuto tried to tear the red-haired girl from him, but she was clinging to him too tightly.

—I have to stop both swords...but if I fail, this girl will be the one hit. The only way to ensure I stop them is to break the swords.

Akuto decided to break the wooden swords with his arms. The idea came to him because the feeling from earlier still lingered in his arms. He felt the same hot mass rising up his arms as when he had grabbed that

wooden sword. He felt he could do the same without the sword.

—If I can control this power and make it explode...

For an instant, Akuto focused his mind.

—I need to draw that power out into empty air instead of into a sword!

The two swords swung down simultaneously from the right and left.

“Hah!”

Akuto swung up his arms. He felt a mass of heat flowing up through his arms. Akuto made that energy explode in the center of his motionless arms.

An intense flow of power burst from his arms.

“Ee!” “Eh!?”

The wooden swords were knocked back by the light emitted from Akuto’s arms and the two Junkos cried out simultaneously.

When Akuto poured in more power, the glowing of his arms increased and the swords broke in two. A smile appeared on Akuto’s face.

—It worked...

But then...

—Eh!? I-it won't stop!

Akuto panicked. He could no longer control the power.

Just like in the classroom, an explosion burst out from Akuto's arms. However, this one was much larger.

"Kyaahhh!" screamed a single Junko.

The false Junko had been disintegrated into nothingness by the explosion.

A sphere of light expanded further and further. After a short delay, a great explosive noise rang out.

Clouds swelled up in the distance due to the heat.

Once his vision cleared, Akuto was finally able to see the aftermath. It looked like a battlefield or the site of a meteorite strike.

A crater about 5 meters across had been created around Akuto and the bamboo around its edge had been mowed down. Junko lay collapsed in the crater. Her uniform had been badly torn and she appeared to be injured.

"Uh, oh..." muttered Akuto.

Unlike before, he had been so focused on breaking the swords that Junko had been caught in the blast. He was overcome with regret.

He tried to get up, but the red-haired girl was still lying on top of him. She seemed dumbfounded by the explosion, but Akuto's movement seemed to bring her to her senses because she suddenly looked around.

"A-all this damage!"

The red-haired girl looked frightened.

"Oh, s-sorr-..."

Akuto opened his mouth to calm her down, but her intense reaction was not at all what he had expected.

"I-I'm sorry!" she shouted. "Ahh! How could this happen!? My hidden power must have awakened! My violent power awakened to save us from this crisis!"

Akuto blankly stared up at the red-haired girl who brought her hands to her cheeks and shook her head with the expressions of the protagonist of a tragedy.

"U-um... That's not what..."

“Oh! You are attempting to console me! Thank you, kind boy! But I have hurt someone! Is my only option to spend the rest of my life serving the god Ko Ro in the clergy? Even my whole life may not be enough to make up for this sin...”

“Sh-she’s not dead yet... Wait, we need to help her!”

Just as Akuto started panicking, something else happened out of the blue.

A few meters away from where they lay collapsed on the ground, a shimmer appeared in the air as if from heat haze. That shimmer quickly took shape and a transparent rectangular object appeared fixed in the air. It was as if a panel of glass had appeared in midair.

That “glass panel” then “opened” like it was a door. Surprisingly, a hand appeared from “inside”.

The hand was the soft, slender hand of a girl. With a comment of “there we go”, a cute, slender girl appeared through the narrow door.

In other words, this girl suddenly appeared out of thin air as if she had forced her way out of that transparent space.

She appeared to be the same age as Akuto. Her slender frame was contained in the school’s uniform. She had green hair and green eyes. She was beautiful, but no expression could be seen on her face. Akuto immediately realized she was not human.

—A L'Isle-Adam!

Akuto was shocked. L'Isle-Adams were the androids rumored to only be owned by those at the very top of society.[1] Their bodies were constructed using mana, so they could move and think like a human but had no emotions.

"You are Sai Akuto-san, correct? I am your observer. My ID name is Korone. I was given my mission on the instructions of the god Markt three minutes ago."

Korone bowed to Akuto. The movement and the shaking of her abundant hair were both identical to a human's, but the expression on her face was that of a doll. Akuto was unsure on how to respond.

—So this is the real observer...

While he was left confused, Korone glanced to the left and right.

"This situation occurred in the past three minutes, so it is my responsibility. I will ask you and Hattori Junko about your dispute after she has been healed." She stuck her hand into the bag hanging at her waist and pulled out a white device shaped like a handgun. "I do not have her consent, but I will proceed to heal her under the authority provided by medical laws."

Korone walked over to Junko and pressed the end of the handgun-shaped device against Junko while she groaned in pain. The device

emitted mana light. The blood and dirt remained, but Junko's injuries gradually disappeared.

"Healing complete. Some foreign substances including germs have entered her body. I predict she will experience a fever and fatigue. I recommend she gets bed rest," said Korone as she stood up.

It seemed Junko had come to. However, her expression changed to a bitter one as soon as she saw Akuto. Two trails of tears flowed down from her almond-shaped eyes.

"Ah...!"

Akuto tried to call out to Junko, but she quickly covered the front of her half-destroyed clothes and ran off crying.

"W-wait!"

Akuto tried to stand up, but the red-haired girl was still on top of his stomach. He lay back down on the ground and looked up at the heavens in that foolish pose.

"I will question her later. I will start with you."

Korone peered down at Akuto's face.

"You're my observer...?"

"Please call me Korone. I will be attending school as your classmate starting tomorrow to protect you from situations such as this. But first I must question you about this conflict. This is what I understand of the situation: Hattori Junko grew agitated at your contact with her, a fight broke out, you fled, and she was lightly injured in the subsequent battle. I wish to determine your intentions during this battle. Did you intend to injure Hattori Junko?" asked Korone in a calm tone.

Her overly businesslike attitude left Akuto dumbfounded, but he resigned himself to the fact that this was simply how L'Isle-Adams were.

"I did not intend to injure her. I was trying to break her wooden swor..."

But before he could finish, someone else spoke from right next to him... or rather, directly above him.

"No! This was because my power awakened!" insisted the red-haired girl in the same tone of voice as ever.

"W-wait," cut in Akuto, but the red-haired girl was not listening.

"I caused that explosion. Ahh, what am I supposed to do!? This is a sin, isn't it? It has to be! What do I need to do to be forgiven?"

"I will investigate it after hearing everyone's testimony. I have limited administrative rights to make limited communications with my god."

"You can communicate with your god! Oh, no! That means you can't make a mistake! Will you forgive me?"

"As I said, I will investigate that after hearing everyone's testimony," replied Korone diligently. Then again, she was never anything other than diligent.

"Oh! I was only trying to protect him, my prince, as his observer! Please believe me!" begged the red-haired girl.

"H-hey, wait! You're making way too many assumptions here."

Akuto tried to interrupt again, but had no luck once more.

"I was protecting him as his observer!"

"I am seeing a discrepancy between your testimony and the current situation. I am also seeing a discrepancy between your testimony and Sai Akuto's. Your testimony will be recorded on the official record. You can be charged for perjury, so be careful," announced Korone. Light flashed deep in her eyes for a few seconds before she added, "My query shows that you are Soga Keena of Year 1 Class A in this academy's high school."

"P-perjury!? M-more crimes!? Oh, I don't even know what to do anymore! First I injure the class rep in an explosion and now this! And how do you know my name!?"

The red haired girl, Keena, was in a state of complete disorder.

As she twisted her body around the top of Akuto's stomach, her skirt

was flipped up and her panties began rubbing roughly against Akuto.

"Wait..."

Akuto's face grew red.



And then Keena realized what position she was in.

"N-noooo!"

She rolled off of Akuto. However, she had rolled onto the ground with her legs spread wide in an M-shape. When she realized this left her panties fully visible, she frantically hid them with her hands.

"Uuh..."

She looked up at Akuto with a blush of embarrassment and tears welling up in her eyes.

"S-sorr-..."

Akuto tried to apologize, but Keena suddenly ran off.

"H-hey, wait!"

When she did not stop after he called out to her, Akuto ran after her. The bamboo grove obstructed his view somewhat, but there was not anywhere she could completely hide herself. It should have been impossible to lose her, but Keena completely disappeared after she jumped behind a thick group of bamboo. He should have only lost sight of her for an instant, but she was nowhere to be seen. When he made his way to where she had disappeared.

"Huh?"

However, Akuto found something surprising when he looked down. He found a school uniform. He picked it up and found it was the same one Keena had been wearing. It was still warm. He looked down again and found a blouse on the ground a bit further on. And a bit beyond that he found some panties.

—Wh-what is going on?

Akuto was confused. He approached the panties, but he hesitated to pick them up. As he stared at the white panties that had some unfamiliar character printed on them, he heard a voice mutter "No!" from nearby.

"Eh?"

He looked around, but found no one.

However, he spotted a small light floating in midair. This was not something emitting light. This insect-sized object was reflecting the setting sun. It was floating just above Akuto's eye level.

—Is that a stone?

Akuto watched the small stone floating in midair, but it began flying away from him an instant later.

"She disappeared. I would like to pursue her, but I cannot determine her location. Unfortunately, it seems Soga Keena left her student handbook in the dorm," said Korone as she approached him from behind.

"You can tell where she is if she has her student handbook?"

"Yes, assuming she does not manipulate the mana and keep the disturbance to a minimum. The reason I was so late is because you used mana in an attempt to hide yourself."

"I did nothing of the sort."

"You may have done so subconsciously because you were trying to escape. The same may be the case for Soga Keena at the moment. I cannot trace her mana. Although she may be doing it intentionally."

"Intentionally?"

"It seems she can hide her mana disturbance."

"That's amazing, but why are her clothes here?"

"I do not know."

"Just what is going on...?"

Part 4

Akuto fell silent for a while. He started to feel it was odd for him to be speaking with Korone so normally.

"So...what am I supposed to do?"

Korone's response was quite clear.

"Please live your life normally."

"...Normally?"

"Yes. I was instructed to ensure your freedom and safety as much as possible. That is what it means to both observe and protect you."

"What if I do something bad?"

"I have been ordered to immediately provide an appropriate punishment," said Korone carelessly.

—I get the feeling that should scare me...

The reason he was not scared may have been due to her outward appearance.

"So what about this incident?"

"I have confirmed that you had no intention of injuring Hattori Junko. I have the authority to trace the mana within your body. You gave me permission when you agreed to my presence. For that reason, I can analyze your emotions back to a few minutes ago."

"So you know what I was thinking?"

"Only your emotions. For the past few minutes, you have primarily experienced confusion. You also felt pity and slight sexual arousal."

"Y-you don't have to point that out!"

Akuto raised his voice, but Korone remained calm.

"If it is necessary to my mission, I cannot accept such a command."

"...I see."

"However, I have been ordered to ensure your freedom in your everyday life. Eliminating any dangers is essential. For that reason, I advise you to be careful in your relationship with Hattori Junko. Soga Keena has also committed a crime. It is a trivial crime, so it can be overlooked. However, if she continues impersonating an official observer, she must be punished."

Akuto was unsure how to respond to that.

"I'm not sure I understand, but she is my classmate too, right?"

"Yes. According to the attendance record, Soga Keena was absent today. That is why you did not meet her until now."

"Then will I be able to meet her tomorrow?"

"Such predictions are impossible for me."

"That is not what I meant... I'm just wondering if I can return her clothes."

Akuto pointed at the clothes scattered on the ground.

"They can be brought to the manager of the girls' dorm. Such a task would cause trouble for you, so I will handle it." Korone began gathering the clothes. "Now, I will take these to her dorm. I will then escort you to your dorm."

Akuto nodded, but something she said caught in his mind.

—Escort me to my dorm?

He quickly received his answer.

After they dropped the clothes off at the girls' dorm, Akuto returned to

the boys' dorm, but Korone remained directly behind him.

The boys in the dorm naturally began muttering amongst themselves. Girls almost never entered so boldly, so seeing a strange and beautiful L'Isle-Adam sneaking in was truly a rare sight.

The dorm hallway was filled with people muttering comments along the lines of, "Akuto's done it again!"

"Um...If you don't mind me asking, just how far are you going to stick with me?"

Korone replied while paying the onlookers no heed.

"If it seems you might try to escape, I will accompany you into the bathroom and bath. If not, you may have your privacy there, but I will stay with you everywhere else."

That only increased the chatter among the students. Korone then raised her hand to call in a Speaker. She gave an announcement that resounded throughout the dorm.

"Good evening, dorm residents. I apologize for the interruption. I am an observer dispatched by the imperial government. Please call me Korone. My mission is to observe Sai Akuto and I hope I may have your cooperation. It may be improper to have a female-type in the boys' dorm, but this form was chosen to put Sai Akuto at ease. We respect the privacy of others, so do not worry. However, please do not consider attacking me. I have been granted the right to resist or provide immediate

punishment.”

Korone’s announcement brought silence to the dorm.

“Um, when you say you respect our privacy, do you mean you will not tell anyone what you see here?” nervously asked a courageous student nearby.

Korone nodded and said, “Correct. Sai Akuto’s privacy will also be protected to an extent. I will be staying in the same room as him, but I will not speak of what happens in that room. Thank you for your time.”

That response caused another round of muttering.

She had said she would stay with Akuto, but it seemed that meant she was even going to live in the same room.

Strange looks that could be seen as envious and pitying turned towards Akuto.

“Y-you really are amazing, aniki!” said Hiroshi as he hurriedly ran over.

He was the only one who was excited in a positive way.

“Amazing? Are you sure you understand the situation?”

“She may be your observer, but this still means you have a L'Isle-Adam.

That's just amazing, aniki!"

Akuto tried to deny it, but Hiroshi only grew more excited.

In the meantime, dinnertime came. While Akuto ate, Korone stood behind him without moving an inch.

"Um...Korone-san? Are you just going to just stand there?" asked Akuto hesitantly.

He could not help but be bothered by it.

"No seat has been prepared for me and I do not eat," replied Korone.

Hearing that, Hiroshi stood up and brought a spare chair over in the blink of an eye.

"Here you go!"

Korone stared at it and asked, "Are you telling me to sit there?"

"Yes?" replied Hiroshi in confusion.

Korone fell silent. She was as expressionless as ever, but it almost made her look perplexed in this situation. After a few seconds, she opened her mouth to speak.

"You are being kind," said Korone as if she finally understood. "My analysis shows that this action is normally done in hopes of receiving a sexual favor in return. However, I do not have the authority to analyze your feelings, so I must assume that is not the case and give my thanks. Thank you."

Korone gave a quick bow and sat in the chair.

Hiroshi gave a bitter smile and replied, "Y-you're welcome..."

After dinner, Akuto returned to his room, but Korone followed him as if it was to be expected. He could not help but feel uncomfortable.

"Um...do you have to come into my room?"

"I see. If you do not wish me to, I will not enter your room."

Akuto was relieved at Korone's surprising obedience.

"I would rather you didn't. You can find somewhere else to sleep. The dorm mother might find you a place if you ask."

Akuto opened the door and entered the room. Korone did not follow.

"See you tomorrow."

With that parting comment, he closed the door. He sat on the bed and

sighed.

A lot had happened and he was sure tomorrow would have its fair share of troubles.

—Hattori-san and Soga-san...

Akuto held his head in his hands, but he was suddenly overcome by an odd feeling. He felt a presence outside his door. And it felt like he was being watched.

Akuto opened the door.

He saw green eyes.

Korone was standing right in front of the door.

She was expressionless and motionless.

Akuto closed the door.

He waited a few seconds and opened it again.

Korone was standing right in front of the door. She had not moved at all.

He closed the door.

He opened it.

Korone was standing there.

Close.

Open.

Korone.

"Are you going to stand there until morning?" asked Akuto once he could not stand it anymore.

Korone nodded and carelessly said, "Yes. I must observe you even if I do not enter your room."

"You don't get tired?"

"No," said Korone.

"...Fine. Come in."

Akuto had given in.

"Then I will enter."

With no signs of delight, Korone entered the room.

Akuto sighed and sat back down on the bed.

Korone stood right in front of him and stared at him.

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

Hey."

"Yes?"

"You don't get tired?"

"No."

"This is doing a lot to interfere with my freedom, so can you act more like a normal roommate?" asked Akuto with a bitter smile.

Korone fell silent as if lost in thought.

“.....”

“What is it?” he asked.

Korone looked up suddenly and said, “My apologies. I simply do not know how a normal roommate acts.”

“I guess that isn’t too surprising. You don’t have emotions, right?”

“No, I do,” she unexpectedly said.

“Eh?”

“I have emotions. If I did not, I could not analyze human emotions. To be technical, it is a sense of self that we lack,” explained Korone.

“A sense of self?”

“We only have an identity telling us who we are while on a mission. It is the sense of self that determines whether it is necessary to display our emotions. The longer a mission lasts, the more that sense of self sets in place. It is only after that begins to happen that our emotions begin to show themselves.”

"Th-that sounds confusing."

"It means this might be somewhat inconvenient for you until I grow used to this mission," explained Korone.

"Will you be able to show emotions once you get used to it?"

That was how he had interpreted it.

"Yes," she affirmed. "However, I require advice on how to act for the moment."

"Um... I usually sit in the chair or the bed. When I have nothing else to do, I sleep," said Akuto.



"Understood."

"I'll take my bath tomorrow morning, so I'm going to bed. You should get to sleep too."

"I see."

Akuto removed his outer clothes and lay down in his bed. Korone then lay down next to him.

Akuto faced to the side and Korone's face was right in front of him. They stared at each other.

She smelled exactly like a real girl.

Akuto felt his heart race, but Korone's expression remained unchanged.

"...Hey."

"Yes?"

"If you lie here, it will be hard to sleep..."

"I see. Are you experiencing sexual arousal?"

"D-don't read my emotions!" protested Akuto.

Korone quickly stood up and stared down at him.

With the same expressionless look, she said, "That was a joke."

"...Eh?"

Akuto was confused, but he caught sight of Korone looking up at the ledge near the ceiling.

“Oh, it appears there is nothing in that storage space. I will sleep there.”

Korone skillfully opened the cover to the shelf and climbed up and inside.

—I-I don’t think I can let my guard down just because she isn’t human...

Akuto could only feel puzzled.

He decided to go to sleep, so he shut his eyes.

“.....

However, he felt a disturbing atmosphere, so he opened them once more. He looked up at the shelf near the ceiling. The cover was open a crack and two green eyes were staring out at him.

“...Hey.”

“Yes?”

“...Are you teasing me?”

“A bit.”

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

Hey."

"Yes?"

"Are you having fun?"

"A bit."

"...That's good."

"Yes."

—I-I don't understand her... I don't understand her at all...

Akuto pulled the blanket up over his head.

Notes:

Jump up ↑ The name L'Isle-Adam is a reference to the French author Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam who popularized the term “android”.

Chapter 3: The Slightly Frightening Upperclassman[sửa]

Part 1[sửa]

After waking up from an odd dream, Akuto stared up at the ceiling feeling unable to calm down.

He had dreamed of his childhood. Nostalgic and bittersweet images filled his head. He seemed to remember something about a small jewel glittering in the sunlight, but he could not remember what exactly his dream had been about.

"What was that...?" muttered Akuto.

He had always been an early riser. He checked the clock on his desk and found it was still 5:30.

It was not worth going back to sleep, so he stood up and stretched. But then he froze in place

"Good morning."

"...Good morning."

Korone's green eyes were staring at him from the exact same position as the previous night.

"Were you doing this all night?"

"Yes."

"You don't get tired?"

"Of course not."

"But...oh, never mind."

Akuto gave up on asking questions.

Korone jumped down from the shelf she used as a bed. Her movements were much more splendid than a normal girl could manage, and she landed lightly on the floor.

"By the way," said Korone suddenly. "What did you mean by 'what was that...?'"

"I had a dream. I was trying to remember something from a long time ago, but I could not quite recall."

"If you wish to search your memories, I can help you. I might be able to find something in your brain."

"No thank you. Anyway, I will be heading to the bath."

Akuto made his preparations. The notice he had been given regarding bath times had said morning baths were allowed. He left his room and

Korone followed.

"I'm taking a bath."

"I know that."

"...Um."

"That was a joke. I will wait in front of the dressing room," said Korone expressionlessly.

Akuto entered the dressing room in relief.

A few others must have been taking a morning bath because he saw a few sets of clothes in the baskets. He removed his clothes and entered the bath. The two boys casually taking a bath looked displeased when they saw him. They were the two who had tried to pick a fight the day before when Hiroshi was making a big deal about Akuto.

Akuto too felt this could become troublesome, but his only option was to try to work things out here.

"Hello."

With that greeting, he began washing his body. The duo spoke up in a tone of voice that was anything but gentle.

"Hey, we heard you defeated Class A's class rep."

Akuto was unsure how to respond, so he shrugged and kept it vague.

"It was an accident."

"Don't be like that. We're trying to be nice."

"You have an odd way of showing it."

Akuto grew a bit belligerent, but then he realized the duo was acting a bit differently from the day before.

"That was because we didn't know about this yesterday. If you really did defeat that class rep...no, just the rumor is enough. At any rate, you need to be careful."

They were still making a threat, but it seemed there was fear of something or someone at the base of it. In a way, they were giving him an honest warning.

"Are you saying someone is going to try to pick a fight with me?"

"No." Both of the boys shook their heads. "We're saying that class rep was truly strong. She was at the top of the third years in the middle school last year."

"What do you mean by at the top? Aren't we talking about getting into fights?" asked Akuto in confusion.

The duo took turns explaining an unexpected side to the academy.

"We may be in no position to speak, but this school has a lot of violent people in it."

"That's why the students have an official and unofficial system of ensuring order."

"The official system is the standard school rules, but the unofficial one is a ranking of our strength in fights using magic. It's unofficial so there are no clear rules or anything, but it gets talked about a lot by idiots and good-for-nothing students."

—So it's like the delinquents in a normal school... And with magic as an option, the girls might even be a part of this...

With that thought, Akuto finally spoke.

"So what about the class rep? What about Hattori-san?"

"She was ranked at #2. Those on the underside of this school – that would be black magic adherents or any other students who use magic to do bad things – hate that class rep. She's only managed to do what she's done because of how powerful she is."

It sounded ridiculous, but Akuto understood what they were getting at.

"So true or not, this rumor is going to make people think I'm ranked higher than the class rep?"

The duo nodded as if to say, "He's finally catching on."

"Yes. That's how people are viewing this. We aren't about to try our luck against someone like you, but be careful. Some people are aiming for reaching the #1 spot."

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't want anything to do with this. And don't forget that I have a L'Isle-Adam from the imperial government watching over me."

The two cut in at that point.

"There are plenty of ways around that. At any rate, just be careful. And like you said last time we met, you can just view us as your fans. If you defeat enough people to start taking over this school, we'll join your side."

Both of them patted Akuto's naked back.

"So you just go with whoever seems to be winning?"

"Yes. Anything wrong with that?"

The duo washed themselves off and left the bath.

"Oh, wait," Akuto called out.

"What?"

"Who is #1? You said Hattori-san was #2."

"Well..." They lowered their voices. "No one knows."

"No one knows?"

"That's right. Only first and second years are ranked because third years are gone so often trying to find a job...but no one knows who is ranked at #1. This has never happened before."

"#3 was badly beaten by whoever it is, so he has to know. He gets really scared whenever the topic is brought up though, so he refuses to say who it was."

"That's crazy," groaned Akuto.

"But it's true."

"Well, I wouldn't try looking into it if I were you," added the second one.
"Whoever it is might come to you, though."

With a smile, the duo shut the door to the bath.

Akuto immediately heard a deep male voice shout “Hey, don’t look!”, but he ignored it. Korone had to be peeking into the dressing room. As further evidence, another voice shouted, “Don’t laugh expressionlessly like that! It sounds like you’re saying mine is small!”

—This is a crazy school... A-anyway, what do I need to do to ensure I have a peaceful school life? I hope I can manage something with some help from Hattori-san, but after yesterday... And even if I apologize, Korone will probably ban me from seeing her. This is a problem. But the situation will only get worse if I don’t make up with Hattori-san.

Akuto let out a long sigh as he soaked in the tub.

After ten minutes of soaking, he washed off his body, carefully wrapped a towel around his lower body, and then entered the dressing room. Korone had the door to the hallway cracked open and was peering in through the gap.

“Why do humans care so much about penis sizes?” she asked.

A normal boy would have been left speechless with that question, but Akuto was an expert at giving diligent answers.

“I think it is because it allows more opportunities to reproduce and therefore more descendants. You view someone with a larger one as a threat because you expect their descendants will wipe out your own. That’s what I’ve heard anyway,” explained Akuto with a serious expression.

"I see. Then please show me your penis. I will compare it with any other male's penis I see and announce their comparative sizes."

"...That isn't happening. Wait, are you teasing me?"

"A bit," replied Korone expressionlessly before Akuto drove her out of the dressing room.

Part 2[sửa]

"Aniki! Let's go to school together!"

Hiroshi came running up when Akuto left the dorm.

"Go to school together? But it's right over there."

"Don't say that. I already decided I would accompany you even this short distance," replied Hiroshi flippantly.

He must have already gotten used to Korone because he greeted her as well.

"By the way, are you pretty well informed about the goings-on of this school?" asked Akuto.

Hiroshi must have been overcome with emotion over having Akuto rely on him because he grabbed Akuto's hand with tears welling up in his

eyes.

"Please ask me anything!"

"Um...This is not anything that important. It's just that I heard the school has an unofficial ranking system."

Hiroshi immediately replied, "Yes! You are ranked at #2, aniki! It's amazing! I had no idea you were heading out to challenge her to a duel yesterday! I was certain you were in love with her! I never would have thought you were tricking her into letting her guard down so you could defeat her!"

—He's probably the one that started the rumor.. I guess that shouldn't surprise me.

"That's not what happened. Forget about all that. A-anyway, is it true no one knows who is ranked #1?"

"Yes! Oh, I get it, aniki! You're working your way to the top so you can conquer the entire school! You may try to deny it, but you're really motivated about this! Are you asking me to look into who it is? I'll do it! I'll do it!"

"N-no. I heard that's dangerous, so you don't have to. I just wondered if you knew."

"R-really? But you can ask anything of me!"

Hiroshi seemed overcome with emotions once more as he looked up into the sky.

"You appear to have a lot of issues. I will not interfere, but I will punish you if you commit any violent acts," warned Korone.

"So if I am attacked, I just have to take it?"

"No. If they attack first, your actions will not be punished."

"So that's how it works," said Akuto with a bitter smile.



Suddenly, he heard a crowd muttering around him. All of the students used this path into school, so it was only natural for him to gather attention. However, this seemed different. He turned around to see what was happening and found a shockingly beautiful girl standing there.

Her hair that reached all the way down to her waist was well groomed and it felt like music should start playing when the wind blew through it. Her eyes looked like they were seeing a dream rather than reality and she

had a kind smile on her lips. Akuto felt like the perfect example of a high-class girl was standing before him.

"Y-you are this academy's top madonna, Etou Fujiko-sama!"

Hiroshi's over-explanatory comment told Akuto exactly who this was. What he did not know was why the girl was standing behind him.

"Good day," she said in greeting.

Fujiko did not bow her head to Akuto. Her lapel pin indicated she was an upperclassman.

"Good morning," said Akuto with a bow.

"U-um, what do you want with aniki?" asked Hiroshi.

Fujiko brought her hand to her mouth and laughed.

"Excuse me for speaking to you so suddenly. I am the dormitory leader for the girls' dormitory."

"The dorm leader?"

Akuto was shocked. At the same time, he realized she must be here to complain about what happened the night before.

"Yes. It seems you brought Soga-san's clothes to the dormitory yesterday," said Fujiko in a gentle voice.

"Oh, that was actually Korone..."

Akuto was surprised his assumptions about her purpose here was incorrect. He pointed at Korone and she nodded before giving a whispered explanation to Akuto.

"Yesterday, I met with Dormitory Leader Etou and explained to her the situation regarding Soga Keena's clothes and Hattori Junko's injuries. She was the dormitory leader, so I had to give her an accurate report."

—That means Etou-senpai called out to me despite knowing the general situation. She must be a nice person...and she certainly is pretty. Come to think of it, she might help me regarding Hattori-san.

Akuto bowed once more and spoke quietly to Fujiko.

"Um, could we speak regarding Hattori-san at some point?"

Fujiko brought a hand to her cheek in apparent confusion, but replied in a whisper of her own.

"Regarding Hattori-san? What do you mean?"

Only Korone and Hiroshi could overhear them.

"The thing is...I want to make up with her, but meeting with her directly would only cause more trouble."

Akuto glanced over at Korone and Korone cut in to say, "I do not recommend a direct meeting with Hattori Junko."

"In that case, leave it to me. I can pass on a message for you. After seeing the actions you have taken, I think there is no chance that you will become a demon king."

"Th-thank you so much!" exclaimed Akuto with another bow.

"This is nothing worth bowing over. Now, have a good day."

Fujiko passed by Akuto. He, Hiroshi, and Korone were left blankly watching Fujiko's receding back.

"Oh, wow! Fujiko-sama is so graceful!" shouted Hiroshi out of overwhelming emotion.

"Honestly," complained Akuto as he watched Hiroshi.

Just as he began to walk, he felt something in his uniform pocket.

"?"

A piece of paper had been placed inside.

—Only Etou-senpai could have put this here.

After making sure Hiroshi and Korone had not seen it, Akuto pushed the paper further into his pocket to hide it.

“You really are amazing, aniki! Even Fujiko-sama is speaking with you!”

“Cut that out already...”

He drove Hiroshi away and arrived at school. Unsurprisingly, he was the center of attention when he entered the classroom. The destruction of the classroom was more than just a recent event. Workers were currently in the process of repairing the classroom walls. It also seemed a rumor had spread saying Akuto had defeated the class representative using underhanded means, so the girls glared at him coldly.

—Living like this is going to be depressing.

Both Junko and Keena were absent. Their desks were empty despite this being the first day after the opening ceremony.

“Good morning, everyone.” said Mitsuko-sensei as she entered the classroom. “I see Hattori-san and Soga-san are our only absences. With that, let’s begin the lesson.”

Mitsuko-sensei, their homeroom teacher, began a review lesson covering the basics of magic. This was the first time Akuto had heard

most of it, so he was very curious.

“It is possible to summon the effects of magic by manipulating magic with one’s mental state. The mana in one’s body and the mana in the air are exactly the same, but they are viewed as separate. For this reason, people are divided between those who specialize in controlling internal mana and those who specialize in controlling external mana. That is why, on the surface, there appears to be two different categories of magic. In addition, the spell user’s personality can be seen in the method of moving mana. There are four categories here: energy waves, healing, necromancy, and illusions. Each of those can be divided between internal and external, so that creates a total of 8 categories of magic. If these are drawn up into a matrix, you can see which spells you will do well with and which types of spells you will have trouble with.”

However, Akuto was also curious about the memo he had been handed. He made sure to write down everything the teacher said, but he could still manage that while not thinking about what the words meant. While keeping his hand moving, he checked on Korone. She was sitting in a seat directly behind him, but she showed no signs of moving.

Akuto secretly pulled out the memo Fujiko had given him. Magical words were carved into the memo paper. It seemed Fujiko had written it out while speaking with him.

<Tonight, come alone to the old strategy room in the main school building’s basement. The method to lose your L’Isle-Adam is simple. L’Isle-Adams have a tail and they can be turned off by pulling that tail.>

—Oh!? I didn’t know that!

Akuto was surprised. And then he grew worried Korone had seen his surprise, so he quickly hid the memo.

—At any rate, Etou-senpai is the only one I can rely on now. I need to lose Korone tonight and head to the school's basement.

After that, he focused on the lesson. He double-checked his notes in the break between classes and spent the time until lunch break without speaking to anyone.

Once the lunch break arrived, Hiroshi invited him to the dining hall and he was unable to decline. Akuto was forced to go along with the boy, but he could not fully suppress a bit of anxiety welling up within his heart.

—Does she really have a tail that turns her off when you pull it?

His gaze naturally turned toward Korone's ass.

Korone was not human, so her body shape had been made into however her designer wanted. It seemed that the designer preferred slender asses. The tense bulge visible below her skirt was beautiful enough to charm even those who were not into slender women.

—I need to create a situation where I'm alone with her. That will happen naturally tonight, but what if the tail was just a joke by Etou-senpai? No, even if she was telling the truth, Korone is a L'Isle-Adam sent by the government. She might be a special model. I need to make sure before tonight. I want to try it out when no one else is watching. I can't just tell

Etou-senpai I wasn't able to make it...

"Aniki? What's the matter?"

Hiroshi's words snapped Akuto out of his thoughts.

"Nothing... I was just thinking, that's all."

"About what? You can discuss anything with me."

"It was nothing."

He could hardly say he had been thinking about how to turn Korone off. However, this denial must have seemed suspicious to Hiroshi.

"No, I can tell something is still bothering you. I've known you for so long I can just tell!"

"You haven't even known me for two days... Oh, but there is one thing I wanted to know."

"What is it!?"

Akuto had decided to ask an arbitrary question to change the subject, but Hiroshi jumped at it too eagerly. For that reason, he asked something he had actually been wondering about.

"What kind of person is Soga-san?"

"You want to know that?" asked Hiroshi in surprise.

"I'm just curious because she's absent."

"You really are amazing, aniki! You want to make every last girl yours, don't you!?"

"Please, enough of that... So what kind of person is she?"

Akuto felt a bit embarrassed as he asked again. This was both due to the simple fact that he was showing an interest in a girl and because he felt an odd mixture of irritation and nostalgia when he thought about Keena.

"Well, she's a weird girl. She isn't anyone worth your attention, aniki. She isn't a bad girl, but she can't do anything with magic but fly. She has no magical talent at all. That's why she has no friends and does nothing but read books and get lost in strange fantasies."

"So how did she get into this school?"

"She's just really good at normal academics. But since she can't use magic, she's treated like a terrible student here."

"So that's it."

Akuto felt an affinity with Keena. Their positions were different yet somehow similar. While lost in that emotion, Hiroshi suddenly continued speaking.

"By the way, aniki."

"Hm?"

"If that's what you were thinking about, why were you staring at Korone-chan? Were you working out a way to make all the girls yours after all? So your plan includes making even your observer L'Isle-Adam yours!"

Hiroshi's excited voice rang out through the dining hall. Naturally, the students turned their attention Akuto's way with expressions that seemed to say, "Ahh..." or "That's what you get with a philanderer like him."

—Denying it would be useless...

Akuto bit his lip, but Korone suddenly spoke up.

"As an observer, I have been made to feel no emotions even if my observation target engages in sexual intercourse with me. Is there a problem?"

That frank comment caused the students in the dining hall to mutter amongst themselves and blush.

"No, there isn't! But could you stop making that kind of joke!" shouted Akuto.

"I cannot stop making jokes so they will likely continue in the future. Please smile and forgive me," replied Korone calmly.

"Wow! I don't really get it, but you're so amazing, aniki!" shouted Hiroshi excitedly.

Akuto had already resigned himself to a lot, but now he gave up even more.

"By the way," said Akuto after choosing curry and beginning to eat.

"Yes?" replied Hiroshi.

"Do you know where I could go to be alone? I can't stand how noisy everything is around here."

"Well..." Hiroshi thought with his chopsticks in his mouth. "Barely anyone goes to the mountain behind the school. It's a bit dangerous, but you should be fine."

"Dangerous?"

"No one goes there because there are monsters wandering around. They rarely appear, but when you enter that mountain, it's at your own risk."

"I see..."

Akuto checked the time. He still had half of the lunch break left. He quickly finished off the curry and stood up.

"Okay, I'll be going."

"I will accompany you, aniki!"

"No, don't. It's dangerous, remember?"

"But I want to go with you."

"I want somewhere to relax."

"But I will be going with you so you cannot be truly alone," pointed out Korone.

"Ah!" cried Hiroshi as he clapped his hands together in understanding.
"Sorry. I didn't realize what you meant."

Hiroshi bowed down with a lewd grin on his face.

Akuto immediately realized what Hiroshi was getting at.

"It's not that!"

"Now, now, now."

Hiroshi began pushing Akuto and Korone out of the dining hall.

"W-wait a second..."

"Now, now, now."

After pushing the two of them completely out of the dining hall, Hiroshi pulled out a handkerchief and saw them off with a comment of, "Have fun."

"It really isn't that!"

Akuto tried to resist further, but Korone grabbed onto his sleeve. She purposefully brought a blush to her face.

"It is my first time, so be gentle."

"I told you to stop making that kind of joke!" shouted Akuto, but then he heard the comments from the other students.

"I guess it makes sense, a demon king would be a horrible person who can't control his libido."

"So the observer L'Isle-Adam also has to satisfy the demon king's out-of-control libido? I feel sorry for her even if she's an android."

"Damn that demon king. I'm so jeal...I mean, disgusted."

Akuto realized it was much too late to change his actions based on how others saw him.

"Oh, fine..."

Akuto began walking.

Part 3[sûa]

"I do not know what your intentions are, but your actions have seriously backfired," said Korone calmly.

"You know... Aren't you affecting my life a lot for a supposed observer?"

"Am I?"

"Yes..."

Once they left the back entrance of the school building, they began passing by fewer students. It seemed Hiroshi had been right. They walked along a path made between the trees and soon could not hear any students' voices. A monster might appear, but it simply seemed like a quiet park walking path for the moment.

"I'm glad it's so calm here."

Akuto sat down and leaned up against a tree on the side of the path.

"I am glad you are glad," said Korone as she stood next to him.

"My life has gotten really noisy ever since you arrived," said Akuto as he looked up at her.

Korone was looking off into the distance and not paying Akuto any heed. Due to his low angle, he could almost see up her short skirt.

—This might be a good chance to see if she actually has a tail.

Akuto slowly slid his back down the tree he was leaning up against.

As the angle gradually changed, he began to catch glimpses of white panties from behind Korone. However, he needed to sink down much lower to see above her ass where a tail would be.

—J-just a bit further...

Akuto slid down until he was almost lying flat on the ground. He did not realize it, but a third party would have thought he was quite the pervert.

—A bit more...

And then...

"Ow!"

Someone punched the top of Akuto's head. That impact knocked him completely down to the ground and his head slid down directly underneath Korone's ass.

—Wh-what?

Akuto was taken aback, but he could see no one when he looked around.

"Is something the matter?" asked Korone.

"S-someone punched me..."

Akuto was blinking in an attempt to clear his head.

"No one is here."

"That's strange."

"What is strange is your position," said Korone in confusion.

Akuto was trying to look directly up at Korone's face, but her nicely shaped legs and ass were blocking his view. His head was sticking right between her legs.

"Ah..."

"You are quite the pervert," said Korone calmly.



She did hurriedly move out of the way, though. She had said she did have emotions, so she may have been embarrassed. But as she did, her skirt flipped up and Akuto got a clear view. Her panties were located well below her waist and a small rabbit-like tail was located just above them.

—Oh, she really does have a tail.

He kept his admiring comment to himself.

"Did you come out here to look at my panties? What a strange person."

Hearing that, Akuto stood up in embarrassment. He then began to wonder who had punched him on the head. He looked around but still could not see anyone.

"Be that as it may...are you sure no one else is here?" asked Akuto.

"I can tell you are not making this up. Was someone really there? I detect no mana distortion," said Korone while looking around with glowing eyes.

"Well, it doesn't really matter."

Akuto was still confused, but then Korone took back her previous statement.

"No, there is a mana distortion. A creature is approaching. It is not human."

Korone was looking deeper into the forest.

Korone spoke once more at the same moment the monster appeared from between the trees.

"This is a demon dog. It is a dog that has been transformed after taking mana into its body. They may be breeding in this area."

The demon dog was twice the size of a normal dog. Its fangs were long and it had drool and erratic breaths leaking out from between its fangs. A ferocious light in its eyes was turned in Akuto's direction.

"Permission from the government is not needed to eliminate a monster. I will now exterminate it."

Korone stuck her hand into the bag that she always held dangling down. She pulled out a gun that was clearly much too large to fit inside that bag. From the size of the barrel, it was enough to blow off the demon dog's head in a single blast.

Akuto panicked when he saw it.

"W-wait a second. You call it a demon dog, but it was originally just a dog, right? Let's try not to kill it."

"But it is dangerous."

"If it was transformed by mana, can't we just remove that mana?"

"No magician has ever done so before."

"If no one has ever done it, then it's worth a try, right?"

Akuto spread his arms and walked closer to the demon dog.

"This is dangerous," said Korone as she stopped him.

"No, I get the feeling I can do this. I don't know how, but I learned the theory on mana control in class today."

Akuto took a few more steps toward the demon dog.

"If understanding the theory was enough, the world would be filled with magicians. I will exterminate it as soon as I detect immediate danger."

Korone held the gun at the ready.

The demon dog bent its body in preparation to leap at Akuto. The instant the tension in its leg muscles was about to be released, Akuto took action before Korone could fire. He shot a white light from his open hand.

—I did it!

Akuto was secretly surprised it had worked, but he had succeeded in controlling the mana inside the demon dog by releasing mana from his palm. An identical white light shot from the demon dog's body. That light continued to flow from the demon dog as if it was overflowing.

"The mana is being taken from within its body. 90%...80%..." announced

Korone.

As her countdown continued, the amount of light leaving the demon dog lessened. At the same time, the ferocious look left the demon dog's eyes.

"The reason no magician has ever removed the mana from a monster's body is because it is supposed to be impossible. I have recorded this and will submit a report," explained Korone as she put the gun back in her bag.

"Then what did I do? It seemed really easy to me..."

Akuto turned back toward Korone.

The demon dog had become a normal dog. It was a shaggy dog with long fur. It sneezed in surprise and began running in circles while wagging its tail.

"This is not a crime, so you will not be punished. However, the data will be used for research. Also, this was unexpected."

Despite actually saying something sentimental, Korone was as expressionless as ever.

"What was unexpected?"

"That you chose to save this dog. Given your past actions of hurting

girls, gathering girls' underwear, and peeking at girls' underwear, I assumed you only did bad things."

"That's quite the arbitrary selection..." complained Akuto.

He pushed the backside of the dog that was still running in circles to guide it toward the school. It was now just a stray dog, so someone would surely take it in there. It ran off in the right direction, but suddenly changed direction. It made a mad dash for a seemingly empty area.

—...?

Akuto was puzzled, but then a scream rang out among the trees.

"Kyaaaahhh! A dog! Stay awaaayyyy!"

He could not see anything, but there was no mistaking what he heard. And the dog was definitely playfully chasing after something.

Akuto recognized the voice.

—Soga...Keena?

Suddenly, a girl appeared out of thin air in front of the dog. Red hair suddenly filled what had been empty air. He saw the color of white skin between that hair. It seemed Keena was nude.

—Eh?

As Akuto watched on in shock, Keena shimmered and disappeared once more. However, the dog continued to chase after something. That meant...

"Somehow I doubt it, but can she turn invisible?" he asked Korone.

"It seems she can. I saw it for myself. It appears I cannot trace her mana when she hides herself. If not even a L'Isle-Adam such as myself can detect her, she truly is turning invisible," agreed Korone.

"But the dog is still chasing her..."

"She may still leave a minute scent. And as for her clothes..."

"I guess she can't turn anything she's wearing invisible with her."

Akuto watched the area just ahead of the dog.

—Why did she follow me out here if she has to strip down naked to turn invisible?

Akuto then caught sight of something glittering. It was the same light as the previous day. Something clicked within Akuto's head.

It had to be a hair decoration she was wearing. He suddenly felt the

same nostalgic feeling as in his dream that morning. The hair decoration seemed somehow familiar

“Ah!”

Akuto recalled something from the past. He had once bought a piece of jewelry with all of his money. He had meant it as a sign of his determination to earn his own money from then on, but he now realized it could have been taken as a request for her to remember him.

—Now I understand why she would follow me out here...

Akuto ran forward with this new realization. Keena was fleeing further and further away. The dog was showing no sign of giving up as she ran toward the school.

Akuto chased after the small light flying through the air. It would normally have been easy to lose track of, but he could just follow the dog whenever he did.

The dog ran into the school building during the lunch break. The students looked on in surprise as they avoided the dog and Akuto. Keena must have been quite flustered because she ran up stairs, down them again, and all over the place at random. She would occasionally let out a scream, but the students loudly watching the commotion drowned it out. No one else seemed to notice her presence.

—What is going on? I’m not sure how to bring this to an end. Oh, maybe she’s afraid of dogs. Um...In that case, I need to do something

about this dog. Then I can speak with her.

Akuto picked up the dog, said "here", and handed it to a girl in the crowd of onlookers. The girl said, "Eh? Wh-what am I supposed to do with this...?" However, she seemed to like animals because she embraced the dog and did not let go.

"You can have it," said Akuto before returning to his pursuit of Keena.

With only the hair decoration to go by, he began to lose sight of her, but she must have been growing tired because she began moving more slowly. It seemed she had a definite destination in mind now.

—Maybe I should make sure she doesn't see me following her.

Akuto hid behind a corner in the hallway and watched the hair decoration. Keena must not have had a very cautious personality because she headed straight toward the basement once she thought she had lost the dog and Akuto.

Akuto followed her from a distance and the door to a rarely used school supplies storage room opened. The hair decoration disappeared into it. The door then closed.

—No one else is around. If I head in there, we should be able to have a nice chat. Oh, but she'll be naked if I go in now. She went in there with some purpose in mind, so she probably has clothes hidden inside. I just have to wait until she's had time to dress.

With that thought, Akuto waited a while before sneaking up to the school supplies storage room, quickly opening the door, and slipping inside.

"Kyaaaahhh!"

He heard a scream.

Keena must have been just about to put her clothes on because she was naked with her panties hanging from her hands.

—It takes that long to get dressed?

Akuto was shocked at that, but Keena was even more shocked. She completely forgot to turn invisible and ran for the sole exit to the room. She was of course still completely naked. However, the sole exit was also the sole entrance, and Akuto stood there after having closed the door behind him.

"Waahh!"

Akuto panicked. From his standpoint, Keena had suddenly charged at him while completely nude, so he was unsure on what to do.

Her head smashed into his and they both fell to the floor. The teacher's large rulers, spare blackboard erasers, and other school supplies that's piled up came crashing down on top of the two who had fallen to the ground in a sort of embrace.

"Oh, s-sorry...!"

Akuto was almost lying on top of Keena – in fact, he was actually lying on top of her – so he hurriedly tried to stand up.

"Kyah! N-no!"

Keena immediately grabbed tightly onto Akuto. She grabbed onto him from below.

"Wah! W-wait, could you maybe let go?"

"N-no... If I do, you'll be able to see me!"

Keena blushed as she wrapped her arms around him even tighter.

"B-but isn't staying like this even more embarrassing?"

"Th-then what am I supposed to do!?"

Keena pressed her body against Akuto while crying.

"I-I'll close my eyes, so let go. You can put your clothes on while I'm not looking."

Akuto shut his eyes as he spoke, but Keena shook her head.

"I can't trust you! You'll open them right away to look over every inch of my naked body while laughing and saying 'Geh heh heh. That's a nice body you've got there, girlie!' Yes, I've always been told it is the diligent-looking guys who are like that!"

"I still think the current situation is even worse..."

"But now is different. Nothing will happen like this, so it's fine. I know you are a nice person."

Keena's comment confused Akuto.

"If you think I am a nice person, can't you trust me when I promise to keep my eyes closed?"

"These are two different things. Even nice people can completely change when they start thinking dirty things."

"Come on now..."

Akuto was frustrated, but the completely ridiculous conversation was also somehow cute and made him laugh.

"Wh-why are you laughing?" Keena was bewildered at first, but she finally began laughing along with him. "Eh...Eh heh heh... When I laugh it's kind of fun..."

When Akuto watched Keena laugh from so close up, he was further reminded of the girl from the orphanage.

"Hey, did we meet a long time ago by any chance?" he asked.

Keena's eyes widened in surprise.

"Eh? I don't think so."

"Wait...then why did you decide to be my observer when first met? And why did you follow me today?"

Akuto was surprisingly shocked by this. Keena seemed confused as to why he was confused.

"What? What? Eh? I thought I already explained that."

"No, you didn't."

"I like sleeping in that bamboo grove."

"I wasn't asking about that."

"That should be enough for you to understand."

"Eh?" Akuto was dumbfounded by how off her comments seemed from what he was asking. "Is that really worth skipping class for?"

"Yes. After all, my grades in magic are terrible," she said in the tone of someone giving an explanation to someone who simply did not seem to understand. "When someone like you arrived where I was resting, I of course knew there was some great meaning behind it."

"Meaning?"

"Don't you think that every meeting with someone is destined? Fighting destiny is lovely too, but you can't enjoy your life unless you just go with the flow of destiny." Keena continued to talk at length. "So when you said I must be your observer, I decided to become your observer. Even if I do not know what one is."

"You don't know!?" shouted Akuto without thinking, but Keena did not seem to get what he meant.

She simply continued speaking as if he was the slow one.

"It does not matter if I do not know. I decided to be your observer, so I knew everything would work out fine if I did what I thought an observer should do."

"That's a strange way of thinking..."

"It is not just a way of thinking. It is the truth. I have always been well-known as a girl who can tell when something is real. A long time ago, I

even knew the difference between a toy and a hair decoration with a real jewel in it."

Keena shook her head to show off the hair decoration she wore. It was shaped like a bird and had a real jewel embedded in it.

—I really do think this is the hair decoration from back then...

"So do you really not remember?" he asked.

"Remember what?"

"I am the one that gave you that hair decoration."

Akuto was hoping Keena would remember now, but she only looked doubtful.

"That can't be true."

"Then how did you get that?"

"Well..." Keena thought for a moment. "Um...I don't remember."

"Wait a second!"

"But I really don't remember," said Keena quietly.

Akuto was at a loss for words, so Keena continued speaking proudly.

"But if you want to think you gave it to me, I understand. You are saying you think our meeting was destined just like I do, right?"

"Eh?"

—Come to think of it, why did I chase after her? Was it just because she ran away? No, I wanted to ask her about the hair decoration. But if she isn't the one, then we almost have nothing to do with each other. Then again, this is the first girl I've ever acted this way about... Wait, what am I thinking?

Akuto's mind was in a state of chaos.

"It's more fun if you assume it was destiny, right? That's how it is with people," said Keena with a smile.

When Akuto saw that somehow untidy smile, he accepted what she was saying.

An odd silence followed. Just as Akuto prepared to say something to break that awkward silence, another voice spoke from above them.

"I believe your actions here are a crime."

It was Korone's voice.

Akuto looked up in shock.

Korone was looking down on them. He had not heard the door open, so she must have teleported in like before.

"A-a crime?"

"I strongly suspect forced criminal indecency."

"Wait...I didn't do anything of the sort!"

"You cannot argue your way out of this situation."

"You know exactly what happened! She has to take off her clothes to turn invisible."

"I fail to see what that has to do with you lying on top of her."

"Um..." cut in Keena as Korone and Akuto argued. "What happens if this was a crime?"

"He is a minor, so a judgment will be made as to whether he must be placed under supervision or not. I possess the authority to make that judgment, so my decision will determine whether he must be sent to the juvenile hall or not."

Korone spoke calmly, but Keena did not seem to understand what was being said.

"O-ohh... I see."

"No, you don't," desperately protested Akuto. "You just have to tell her I did nothing wrong!"

"Eh? Why me?"

"If you tell her this was an accident, nothing will happen to me!"

The blank expression left Keena's face and a grin replaced it.

"I get it! So if I was willing, then there's no problem?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Korone.

"Then..." Keena looked up at Akuto. "I will say that if you promise to grant one request."

"Uuh..." groaned Akuto.

—Why is she asking me this? But I can't take on anymore troubles at this point.

"Well, will you do it? Will you, will you!?" urged Keena with a grin.

—Was she trying to lure me into this trap from the very beginning? If not, her personality makes no sense. Does she remember our past but is pretending not to? Could she have been watching me ever since we were kids?

Akuto was so confused he started to lose track of everything.

"C'mon, c'mon!"

However, Keena continued pressing him for a decision.

Ultimately, he gave in.

"Fine, I'll do it."

"Okay, then I embraced him," said Keena.

Korone readily accepted it.

"Understood."

Korone handed Keena her clothes.

"You gave in easily."

Akuto looked away and stood up.

It seemed Korone was helping Keena into her clothes. He heard a rustling of clothes as Korone said things like, "Okay, raise your hands." After Keena said she was dressed, Akuto turned back around.

Akuto could not decide if her expression was one of innocence or pure stupidity.

—What is with her? But I promised to grant a request of hers. What do I do if she asks me to use my magic power to help make her money?

Despite having the face of a villain, Akuto's thoughts were those of a saint.

Keena smiled at him and said, "Now about your promise."

"Yes?"

Akuto tensed up.

"Will you be my friend?"

"Eh?"

"Please become my friend."

"...Sure."

Akuto agreed mechanically, but he did not realize until a few moments later what she had said.

—That was unexpected... That doesn't seem like much and I suppose I could not hope for a better result...so why do I feel like I just took on a great burden that will remain with me for the rest of my life?

At that point, the chime signifying the end of the lunch break sounded.

His classmate's attention gathered on Akuto once more during the afternoon classes. This was because he entered the classroom along with Keena who almost never showed up for class.

"Wow! That's aniki for you!"

Hiroshi alone seemed overly excited about it.

Akuto could only force a calm expression.

Part 4[sửa]

Once the day's classes were over, Akuto returned to the dorm and ate dinner. Once back in his room, he had to prepare himself mentally for the huge task ahead of him.

—Now then, this is where it gets tricky...

He glanced over at Korone who was expressionlessly relaxing in his room. He had already confirmed she had a tail. He had to pull that tail during the night.

Korone grew suspicious as Akuto watched her nervously.

"What is the matter? A change has come over your breathing."

"I-it's nothing."

"It does not appear to be an illness, but it could be a psychogenic symptom. Please be careful."

With that casual comment, Korone returned to diligently lazing around on Akuto's bed.

—Dammit. I guess I just have to pull the tail like this.

While Korone was looking away, Akuto stood up from the chair and sat on the bed. Now his hand could reach Korone's ass.

—When it comes down to it, this is making me nervous.

When he started staring so intently at her ass, he began to feel like he was committing a crime. Due to the way she was lying on the bed, her panties were perfectly visible from his position. He stretched his hand out toward them and could only think he was a molester or a rapist.

—J-just a bit further...

Sweat poured from his brow. When he began to wonder if she would notice, his heart rate shot even further up.

—A little more...

Suddenly, he heard a knocking.

"Gyaaahh!"

He almost jumped up from the bed out of shock.

Someone was knocking on the window from the outside. He turned around with the expression of a criminal caught in the act and saw Keena's grinning face outside the window.

—Oh, right. This is the first floor.

Given her smile, he doubted Keena had noticed what he was doing. He put on a casual expression and opened the window.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Do I need a reason to visit my friend?" asked Keena as she climbed in through the window.

"Hey, wait..."

"My new friend, let's eat together."

Keena held a bag of snacks out toward Akuto.

"Are girls supposed to come to this dorm?"

"Everyone does it all the time. As long as you're back in time, it doesn't matter."

Keena sat on the bed without asking. Korone sat up and raised a hand in greeting.

"Welcome. It is good for his mental health to have a friend."

"I know, right? At least you understand, Korone-chan."

Keena opened the bag and placed it on the bed. It contained rice crackers.

"Hey, don't spill crumbs everywhere."

"You can just wipe them off later," said Keena as she began munching on one. "Do you want one, Korone-chan?"

"No, thank you. I may be able to eat, but disposing of the waste later is a pain."

"I see. Too bad."

Keena likely did not understand what Korone had meant, but she nodded in acceptance and held a rice cracker out toward Akuto.

"Have one."

"...Fine, fine."

Akuto took the rice cracker and ate it.

—This is making it difficult to pull Korone's tail.

Keena then suddenly placed a hand on Korone's ass.

"Korone-chan, if you lie on the bed like that, he can see your panties."

"He said it made him nervous if I do not laze around while in the room."

"But he was trying to touch your butt when I got here."

Keena gave Akuto an accusing glare.

Akuto's heart jumped up into his throat.

"Touching a L'Isle-Adam's butt is not a crime," informed Korone.

"You mustn't do that," scolded Keena.

—And this is making it even more difficult...

Akuto began mentally sweating while giving a vague smile.

"I-I knew that. In fact, you are mistaken about what I was doing."

"I hope I am."

Keena continued munching on rice crackers. Akuto had only eaten one, but their numbers were beginning to visibly dwindle.

"Hey, A-chan."

"A-chan?"

"I can call you that, right? You can call me Ke-chan." Keena continued speaking without listening. "Do you like rice, A-chan?"

"Rice?"

"Yes," confirmed Keena. "Rice. That white grain."

"Um... I suppose I do..." agreed Akuto arbitrarily.

Keena suddenly leaned forward and said, "You love it, don't you! Then you need a rice cooker in your room! I'll come by every day! I'm not allowed to have a rice cooker in my room, but you can have one in yours, right?"

"I'm not actually sure if I can or not... And why a rice cooker anyway?"

"Sometimes I want to eat nothing but rice. Rice is so wonderful, don't you think? It's white and shiny like some kind of jewel! I love feeling like 'I'm eating a pile of jewels!'. It's like I have countless pearls in my mouth and the sweet flavor spreads out in my mouth as I bite into them..."

For some reason, Keena spoke on and on about rice as if entranced.

"I...can't have a rice cooker here," said Akuto quietly.

Keena immediately shouted back, "No, you have to! I want one! I want one!"

"Why do I have to do what you say?"

"If you refuse, I'll reveal to everyone how perverted you are, A-chan."

"Now what kind of misunderstandings are you making!?"

"That's a misunderstanding?" Keena looked over at Korone for confirmation and the L'Isle-Adam nodded silently. "I see. It must be tough. You really are diligent, A-chan."

That last comment was made very casually, but Akuto was extremely thankful to hear it. Just like with Junko, he had a weakness for people who understood him.

"Th-that's right," agreed Akuto wholeheartedly, but Keena only looked confused.

"Do you want another rice cracker?" she asked.

Akuto took the rice cracker.

"Thanks."

"You can show your thanks by getting a rice cooker to-..."

"No."

"Eh? But rice is so amazing."

Keena then spoke at length on the wonders of rice. Akuto was a bit annoyed, but Korone seemed oddly interested. She even said, "So,

cooked rice can have that much of an effect on the human psyche..."

"Ah, if only everyone could eat rice together. Then we would have world peace."

After that ridiculous comment from Keena, Korone said "I have this" and stuck a hand into her bag. She pulled out a cylindrical object with a switch. It was clearly a bazooka.

"This is a military drug dissemination device. It scatters a drug over a wide area to either poison an enemy unit or administer a healing medicine to an allied unit. If you put rice in it..."

"Stop that," said Akuto with a shrug.

"Why?" protested Keena while pouting her lips.

The ridiculous conversation continued on after that. The time helped to calm Akuto's heart, but he also grew more and more impatient as the night wore on.

—I need to hurry up and meet Etou-senpai.

"Um, don't you need to get back soon?" asked Akuto in the middle of the rice discussion.

"Eh? I can stay a bit longer."

"No, um, I have to study."

"Then I guess I have no choice... You aren't trying to drive me out so you can do something to Korone-chan, are you?"

Keena pouted her lips once more.

Akuto was shocked by her oddly accurate intuition, but he denied it with a stiff smile.

"Of course not."

"Ehh? Mh...See you tomorrow then." Keena reluctantly stood up. "But you really mustn't do anything to Korone-chan."

After repeating that for good measure, Keena climbed out of the window once more.

Akuto watched her leave and then shut the window.

"Sigh..."

He cleaned up the mess Keena had left and sat on the bed.

Korone then scooted up next to him.

"Now that the third wheel is gone, it is time for some tender loving,"

said Korone expressionlessly.

"Could you please stop with those jokes?

"This is no joke. I would feel bad if you became a sex offender because I failed to satisfy your sexual urges."

"How many times do I have to tell you that that incident with Soga-san was a misunderstanding!?"

"I am not talking about that. You were trying to touch my butt, were you not?"

Akuto began sweating at that, but then...

—Wait. This might be my chance.

"Sorry about trying to touch it, but didn't you say it is not a crime?"

"Not against a L'Isle-Adam, no," affirmed Korone.

—This is it.

"If you want me to touch it that badly, maybe I will."

—Ahh, this is making me sound really bad... But...

Internally, Akuto was incredibly nervous as he reached a hand out toward Korone’s ass. Even if she was an android, he felt the same softness as from a human.

“Nn...” moaned Korone as she blushed.

Akuto stopped moving his hand out of shock.

“Oh, s-sorry...”

“Just kidding.”

Korone’s calm expression returned.

“.....”

Akuto was left speechless.

—O-oh, right. The tail.

He quickly slipped his hand up and grabbed Korone’s waist with his fingers. He felt the small tail there.

“Ah...”

As soon as Korone started to say something, Akuto grabbed the tail and pulled.

With a slight hum, Korone stopped moving.

—D-did it work?

Akuto peered into Korone's eyes. All light had left them.

—Thank goodness she actually stopped. Unless...this isn't another joke, is it?"

Given Korone's past actions, it was possible she was teasing him. Akuto lifted up her hand and poked at her leg to make sure she really did not move.

—Okay. With that settled...

Akuto climbed out of the window and left.

Part 5[sửa]

He reread the memo.

<Tonight, come alone to the old strategy room in the main school building's basement.>

He had been worried about sneaking into the school at night, but he

luckily managed to do so without running across anyone else. Akuto guessed so few people were out because the night could be dangerous. If there were monsters in the mountain behind the school, it would not be surprising if they would appear at the school during the night. And he became convinced of it when he entered the basement. The first two levels of the basement looked like a normal school, but the old strategy room was further down. The door leading down to that level was made of metal. It looked as if it would normally be locked, but it easily opened now. He pulled open that heavy door and found a dimly lit staircase. The hole leading down was truly an underground labyrinth that was no more than a cave with metal support pillars embedded in the walls to prevent a cave-in.

—Is this from the time of the war? I doubt the school wants students going down here.

It seemed the perfect place for a secret meeting. The old strategy room was located on the third level of the basement and its door was already standing open. Light spilled out from the room. He knocked and peered inside to find a large rectangular table with Fujiko sitting on the opposite side.

“Welcome. I have been waiting for you.”

Fujiko smiled kindly. Akuto felt her graceful beauty went well with the underground environment lit only by a mana torch.

“Sorry about having you go through all this. Your instructions worked perfectly,” said Akuto with a small bow.

"Pull the tail again to reboot her. She will lose her memories from a few seconds before and afterwards, so use it if you are ever in a bind."

Fujiko offered Akuto a seat.

"Now about what I wished to discuss," began Akuto.

"Yes, about Hattori-san. I have heard many rumors spreading about the two of you."

"I assure you, those are all nothing more than rumors. The truth is...well, it's complicated."

"Ho ho ho," laughed Fujiko. "Oh, excuse me. Hattori-san can be stubborn, but that is why we are all able to trust her. Do not worry, though. I will help you resolve this in a convenient manner. Hattori-san's injuries should be fully healed tomorrow, so I will contact her and set up a meeting between the two of you after school."

"Th-thank you so much."

"She is a very diligent person, so it should all work out if you show her a diligent side of yourself."

"I tried that, but it failed due to my lack of knowledge about this school's committee system."

"Yes. I heard from your class how you volunteered as the cleaning

officer. How about I suggest a position for you to take?" Fujiko clapped her hands together. "How about you became the public morals officer? No position requires more diligence than that."

"That sounds good. But...sorry about doubting you, but is a public morals officer here the same as a normal public morals officer?"

"I believe so. Their role is to correct the morals of the students. The one aspect that is not normal is that the position is currently vacant."

"There isn't one?"

"Sadly, the school's morals have gone straight to hell...oh, pardon my language. The school's morals are so bad that no one wishes to be the public morals officer."

"I see."

—In that case, Hattori-san would probably love it if I took the position.

"You can submit the paperwork to the student council during the lunch break tomorrow. Does that sound good to you?"

"Yes, thank you very much," said Akuto as he stood up to go.

"If you have any problems, feel free to ask me for help. Oh, right. And if your discussion with Hattori-san does not go well..."

Fujiko placed two pills on the desk.

"A...drug?"

Akuto reached out and picked up the pills to look at them. They were perfectly normal looking white pills.

"I specialize in magical medicine research. If by some chance Hattori-san refuses to listen to you, feel free to use this."

Fujiko then handed a small handgun-like object to Akuto. It was small enough to fit in his palm and the barrel was large and flat.

"The pills are the magical medicine and that is a device used to administer magical medicine."

Akuto recalled that Korone had used a similar device.

"If you fire one pill each into the two of you, you will come to a true understanding."

Fujiko opened the grip of the device. It had exactly two openings for the pills. After loading the pills inside, she handed it back to Akuto.

He took it, held it in his palm, and stared at it.

"But I do not like the idea of using a drug to help..."

"I understand. This is only as a last resort. However, I know just how stubborn Hattori-san can be. Use it if it seems a fight will break out."

"In that case, I will borrow it just to be sure."

Akuto put the device in his pocket.

—What a nice person.

"I'll be going now," he said before leaving. He felt confident he would be able to solve at least one of his problems the next day. He hoped he could resolve all of the misunderstandings one by one once that happened.

As he was closing the door to the old strategy room, something caught his mind. He checked again, but it seemed it was nothing more than the door creaking.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it was nothing. Goodbye."

After making sure Akuto had left, Fujiko grinned.

She did not simply smile; she grinned. This evil grin suited her beautiful

face just as much as the kind smile from before, but it gave an entirely different impression. This was an expression only a truly evil villain could give.

“Now then. That went well! Heh heh heh heh...”

As she laughed, she snapped her fingers and the wall behind her rotated. A room was hidden behind it. She slipped past that wall and walked into the other room. This room was covered in purple velvet and silver decorations. The mostly-black furniture and the glass lab devices placed on top of it gave the room a very ominous atmosphere.



"It seems I will once more gain quite a bit without having to take any real action myself," said Fujiko to the empty room as she sat in a velvet-covered sofa.

However, she was not speaking to herself. A large glass container was sitting on the edge of the sofa. It was filled with a liquid and the severed head of a beautiful young man, who resembled Fujiko, was floating in it.

"Are you still doing that?" asked the head.

"Come on, onii-sama. You never do anything but lecture me." Fujiko stroked the glass container.

"And you never listen to what I say. Even after my death, you have done nothing but worry me."

"You have no soul, so you cannot actually be worried. Speaking with you is not easy."

Fujiko laughed.

Necromancy was a type of magic that reconstructed someone based on the personal records stored by their god. The reconstruction would provide the same reactions the living person would have. One could speak with these reconstructions and ask them anything they knew in life. However, their soul would not change due to new experiences, so they were fundamentally different from a living person. But as they gave the exact same responses as the living person, normal people had a high probability of growing very confused if they used the technique. Necromancy was therefore a forbidden spell that only top-class magicians were allowed to use.

Those who broke magical law by using forbidden spells as they liked were known as black magicians.

"Hey, onii-sama. It seems the future demon king will soon be my servant."

"Oh, no. What are you plotting this time?"

"Anyone given that drug will fall under my mind control."

"Then why not have him take it now?"

"What? I cannot do that. I enjoy deceiving people. Giving it to him now would be no fun at all. Plus, it is important that I never actually lied to him. Once the two of them swear their loyalty to me, they will indeed get along perfectly."

"Oh, why do you have such a horrible personality, Fujiko?" complained the head. "This is why you are so lonely you have to hold conversations with me."

"That is merely because no one else can match my level. Why must we prove our qualifications to use magic? The students of this school are such fools for blindly following the government."

"I have no opinion on that. I never reached a conclusion regarding the issue in life. However, I hope your plan fails, Fujiko."

"Oh? Too bad then. I am sure it will go well. I have made plenty of preparations."

"Preparations? What do you mean?"

"That is a secret." Fujiko smiled mischievously as she pulled out a black-covered notebook that was not her student handbook. "If I implemented the dark plan written in this grudge notebook, it is sure to succeed... Heh heh heh heh heh heh..."

Fujiko grinned as she flipped through the "grudge notebook".

"What a dark girl Fujiko has become," lamented her dead older brother.

"Leave me alone. I want to make him mine no matter what. He possesses the power that we black magicians view as ideal. He is destined to destroy the world in the future... I must have him."

Fujiko stroked the glass container lovingly and brought her lips in for a kiss. The illusion of her dead brother grimaced within the glass container.

Chapter 4: That Highly Assumption-Prone Girl

Part 1

"Is there no public morals officer here?" Akuto asked Hiroshi.

"Not currently," he replied.

They were walking to school. Korone was also walking behind them since Akuto had deactivated her the night before. Just as Fujiko had said, she had lost her memories from a few seconds before being deactivated and a few seconds after being reactivated. In other words, she did not even realize she had been deactivated.

"Is there a reason why?"

He was not doubting Fujiko, but with the many customs this academy had from the past, he asked Korone just to be sure.

"According to the records, the previous holder of the position resigned. The reason is not given, but I predict it was due to fights with those who did not like the public morals officer."

"Fights?"

"Yeah, I heard he was targeted by delinquents," added Hiroshi.

In other words, it was a difficult job.

—Even Hattori-san should be pleased when she hears this.

Junko did not show up to class that day either.

During the lunch break, Akuto left Hiroshi behind and headed to the student council room.

It seemed the student council officers would gather there during the lunch break. They showed Akuto in while looking a bit frightened. The student council president however did not hesitate. She asked him what he wanted without fear.

The president wore a stylish hat and had a surprising amount of dignity and presence for her small size. That and her arrogant attitude gave off the impression of someone who was used to standing above others.

“Oh, what do you want? Such a famous visitor.”

“Please stop treating me like I’m famous. Um...I came here in order to volunteer as the public morals officer.”

“The public morals officer?”

The members of the student council began muttering amongst themselves. The three lower officers looked worriedly between the president and Akuto.

“Being the public morals officer,” said the president while pointing at

Akuto. "Well, it is not easy. Are you a good fighter?"

"I don't know. I have never done it before," replied Akuto honestly and the president gave a bitter smile.

"I see. Fine then. Being the public morals officer in this school is not easy. You can quit whenever you want, so just try it out for now. The public morals committee is an independent organization subordinate to the student council, so you can do the job however you like."

"Is that so? I don't entirely understand, but I will do my best."

"You will do your best despite not entirely understanding the situation? At any rate, welcome. I suppose this should at least be interesting, so that's something."

That last comment was spoken more to the surrounding student council officers than to Akuto.

Akuto was then given the key to the public morals committee room. As soon as he left the student council room, Akuto was surprised to hear an immediate school-wide announcement on the issue.

<This is a notification from the student council. A new public morals officer has been decided. He is Sai Akuto-san. If you have anything to discuss with him, go to the public morals committee room.>

It seemed the student council was good on ensuring that all arrangements had been made, but Akuto was unaware that someone

else was even better at that. He realized this when a telepathic conversation arrived toward the end of the lunch break.

"Sorry about suddenly contacting you. Do you have a moment?"

Fujiko spoke to him through his student handbook just as he had finished eating.

"Yes," replied Akuto telepathically.

"Hattori-san may not have shown up for class, but I had her promise to meet you. The meeting is at 4 PM in the old barracks on the third floor of the underground labyrinth in the basement. Will that work for you?"

"It will. Thank you very much."

After thanking her, Akuto ended the telepathic conversation.

Part 2

Meanwhile, Fujiko grinned within the girls' bathroom after the conversation came to an end.

"Heh heh heh heh... Oh, this is so much fun. Conspiracies are so wonderful."

Fujiko used her student handbook once more to contact Junko. Once the telepathic conversation connected, her expression completely changed to that of a high-class girl.

"Is this Hattori-san?"

"Ah...Dorm leader!" replied Junko as if she was straightening up her back.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Oh...yes. I am fine now!"

"In that case, is it due to that new student that you are not at school today? I apologize if this is a difficult question to answer."

"Oh...um...yes. That...actually is the reason," said Junko with difficulty.

Her behavior showed just how much she trusted Fujiko as the dormitory

leader.

"I only ask because that new student has asked me to help reconcile your differences."

"Reconcile our differences? After everything he-..."

"Yes. But I think this may be because he has become the new public morals officer."

"The public morals officer? But that..."

"Yes, it has been a horrible position to hold ever since that rumor spread that defeating the head public morals officer will increase your position in the rankings. It is truly sad that so many people are so obsessed with who is the strongest in the school."

"And that is why no one wants to take the position. But what does that have to do with reconciling his differences with me?"

"I do not know, but he may have some ulterior motive. I do not know what that boy is thinking, but he may want to create a single united faction within the school."

"Yes, it probably is that."

Despite speaking with an upperclassman, Junko let displeasure enter her voice.

Fujiko smiled and said, "I was asked to play the role of intermediary as your dormitory leader, but let me tell you to stay on your guard. He suggested you meet him at 4:30 PM on the third floor of the school's basement."

"A large area where he can freely act violently. I will be careful."

"Please do. Remember, 4:30," reiterated Fujiko before ending the connection.

She hurriedly connected to a third person.

"Ahn?" said a rude male voice.

"Oh? Since when do I allow you to act like that to me?" asked Fujiko in amusement.

The voice grew panicked and said, "S-sorry!"

"Have you forgotten how this works? Is it simply because it has been so long since we last met? Please do not make me remind you."

"I-I wouldn't dream of it! So what do you need, milady?"

"You should be thankful because I will be giving you some useful information. Have you heard of the new head public morals officer?"

“Oh, you mean that stupid bastard? He probably doesn’t know what he’s getting into, but I can only view this as a challenge against those of us on the underside of the school. That said, he’s a bit of a special case. He has a government L’Isle-Adam, so we can’t touch him. It would be best to just leave him alone.”

“Silence,” cut in Fujiko. “Takeshi, do you really think you can become a black magician like that? Listen. He will head down to the third floor of the basement at 4 PM. And he will not bring the L’Isle-Adam with him. Take a hostage or use whatever underhanded tricks you can think of to teach him where he stands at this school! No matter how much magic power or physical strength he has, he can be defeated with psychological violence. Make sure to give this your all.”

Fujiko forcibly cut off the telepathic connection.

“Now then...”

Fujiko brought back the high-class girl look that the normal students looked up to. However, her mind was still filled with dark thoughts.

“The preparations are complete. No matter what happens, he will end up using that drug.”

Fujiko chuckled. She passed a student in the hallway, but the student only saw Fujiko’s usual kind smile.

Part 3

Once the afternoon classes came to an end, Akuto sat in his seat wondering how he would deactivate Korone and head to the basement with no one seeing it. However, he realized an odd atmosphere had filled the classroom. The other students always kept their distance from him, but they seemed legitimately afraid today.

"Does anything seem odd to you?" he asked Korone.

"I do not know what analysis of the situation led to that comment, but the primary difference from normal is the absence of those two," replied Korone.

"Those two..."

Akuto looked around. He realized that Keena and Hiroshi were not in the classroom. Keena had floated off somewhere, but that was the norm. Hiroshi, on the other hand, had gone to the bathroom earlier but he never come back.

—This makes getting to the basement much easier.

Akuto stood up.

"There is somewhere I want to go check out."

"Where?"

"The basement."

"Why?"

"I want to see those historical sites from the time of the war."

With that arbitrary excuse, he left the classroom. Korone of course followed. No one else followed, so he simply needed to deactivate Korone once he made it to the basement.

Just as they were walking down the staircase to the school portion of the basement, Korone suddenly spoke up.

"By the way."

"Yes?"

"As your observer, I will not interfere, but I do not want you to fail."

Akuto was confused by this sudden comment.

"What are you talking about?"

"Do not forget that I must overlook it if someone is manipulating you. However, that can be seen as a form of interference on my part. The result of overlooking that manipulation can be seen as my responsibility."

Akuto still did not understand what she was getting at.

"Meaning?"

"I cannot say that you properly understand how you are seen by those around you. If you were to learn to understand that, it would help you grow as a person."

"Please do not say things that will just annoy me."

Akuto faced Korone for a few seconds and grew a tad irritated. He heard a suspicious metallic noise from nearby, but due to that irritation, he decided he was just hearing things when he did not immediately see anything.

"A-anyway, let's go."

He opened the heavy metal door leading to the underground labyrinth.

As soon as he passed through, he turned around and closed the door. He then realized Korone had her back to him.

It still made him nervous, but this was his second time and he knew this might be his only chance. He quickly reached for Korone's ass and stuck his hand up her skirt.

"Hyah!" shouted Korone in surprise.

Akuto's heart leapt into his throat, but he managed to pull her tail.

She stopped moving while still standing.

"Hoo... I don't think I'll ever get used to deactivating her like this..."

He sat Korone down on the ground next to the door.

He opened his student handbook and called up a map of the underground labyrinth. The school had an exploration club that sold the maps. The accuracy of the map was a bit suspicious, but they claimed it was perfect as far down as the fourth level. Also, the higher levels were used by a lot of the different school clubs. The old strategy room was apparently used for secret meetings by the administrators of the girls' dorm, so it would not be surprising if others used the area too.

And for this reason, it had many different entrances. Akuto had assumed the one he used was used a lot due to being the most obvious, but apparently it was so far away from most of the useful areas of the underground labyrinth that it was rarely used. There were apparently even paths leading to the basement from the dorms and some supply closets for classroom cleaning supplies. Akuto had not actually confirmed any of this was true, though.

Unsurprisingly, a portion of the underground labyrinth had become a gathering place for delinquent students. Once Akuto entered the third floor of the basement, the students squatting on the side of that pathway and the students peering out from behind open doors glared at him.

—If they show this much blatant hostility, they lose any right to complain if I were to suddenly attack them.

Akuto of course had no intention of doing that. Part of it was due to being a good person, but it had more to do with him not being powerful enough to take on so many people at once. However, he had gained some ability with magic since entering the academy.

—And Korone isn't with me right now. As long as I don't kill them, I won't be blamed for it.

Akuto suddenly realized that his logical mind and his heart had begun to diverge. He felt discomfort and pleasure at the same time. His mind told him it was wrong to hurt others, but his heart told him it would feel good to hurt those belligerent types who enjoyed breaking the rules.

Akuto continued toward the old barracks while hoping those students did nothing to anger him.

—I hope nothing happens. But why would Hattori-san choose such a dangerous place to meet? Oh, I suppose she is #2 in the school.

He arrived at the door to the old barracks while lost in thought. It was a large door that slid to the side, so it resembled the door to a giant metal storage container. It was closed now, but it did not appear to be locked.

Akuto placed a hand on the door. It must have been opened relatively frequently because it slid loosely and smoothly open.

Cool air flowed out from within. It was dark inside, but it seemed to be a large area. Akuto could only see the area the light from the passageway reached. The room seemed to be filled with nothing but rows of three-level bunk beds that looked like steel shelves.

—Oh, yeah. This was the barracks. Now where's the light switch?

Akuto stepped inside.

An impact immediately struck his head as if something heavy had fallen on him.

He was instantly knocked to the ground.

—Gh!

The lights came on. Akuto could see several sets of legs. He was surrounded.

He looked up and saw several grinning faces. Everyone was holding weapons. The shock batons, socks filled with blunt objects, and other weapons that were meant to cause pain rather than to kill.

"Were you not even a little afraid?" said a mocking voice as one of the batons was swung down toward him.

—...!

Akuto was not able to bring up his arm to block it. Instead, he focused his mana on the back of his neck where the baton was headed. A flow of light gathered there and repelled the baton.

“Wah!”

The boy holding the baton hurt his hand when the weapon struck an unexpected wall.

—Am I getting used to this? No...I was just really focused this time.

Akuto was surprised at what he had managed. He had blocked the attack without losing control of his powers. He had not actually done any training, so he was a bit confused that it had worked so well. However, he almost instantaneously came up with the answer. Instead of vaguely trying to “protect himself” he had been focused on a specific goal.

—Now, how am I going to defeat them?

At that point, Akuto realized he was oddly calm.

He felt some pain, but he forced himself to stand up and view his surroundings. He stood at one end of the old barracks which was about the size of a gym. Six boys surrounded him. However, those were not the only attackers. A boy was sitting on a bed on the opposite side of the barracks and around a dozen more boys were surrounding him.

Akuto could not find any words to say to them. If they were going to use violence, he would simply have to respond in kind.

The boy with the baton walked toward Akuto. Instead of running, he tried to swing the baton down once more, but Akuto stopped it with his arm. He then grabbed the baton and pulled. Once the boy lost his balance, Akuto punched him in the face.

However, the punched student looked somehow disappointed. The punch had not been as strong as he had expected.

—I see. It isn't like I actually know how to fight.

He may have succeeded in defending himself with mana, but Akuto had not grown physically stronger.

"H-he's really weak!"

The baton boy grew arrogant and came in for another strike. Instead of simply punching, Akuto released focused mana this time. His right fist struck the baton and the baton bent. The bent baton slammed into the boy's face.

He wordlessly collapsed to the floor.

The remaining students' expressions stiffened in fear. They moved away from Akuto bit by bit as if to avoid being his next target.

—How unpleasant can you be?

Akuto stretched his hand out toward one of them. He focused his mana there and fired a mana burst that resembled a bullet.

The mana struck the boy in the gut and he collapsed to the floor in pain. He held his stomach and rolled around while groaning.

"Shit."

The remaining four fired mana at Akuto just as he had done. Instead of dodging it, Akuto gathered mana on the surface of his body to deflect the blasts. The amount of light his shield created caused the four to panic.

—Without ever getting into a proper fight before, I had no way of knowing, but I guess this is what it means to naturally have more mana. This makes sense. They started with physical attacks because that is what they are best at.

Akuto ignored the four and walked further into the room. The one surrounded by the others was obviously their boss. He would be the one to speak to.

The boy had a large build and had enough meat on his bones for his chin to hang down slightly. He had an unassuming yet thuggish face, so he was clearly a brutal person at first glance.

"I would like to know why you suddenly attacked me," said Akuto and

the boy sneered at him.

"Why does it matter?"

"I would feel better if I understood why. Right now, this leaves me uneasy."

"Then I'll tell you. Now that you're the new public morals officer, everyone who wants to prove their skill will attack you. We just thought we'd give you a warning."

"...Attacking me is a poor method of warning me. By the way, I never got your name."

"It's Kimura Takeshi," said the #3 ranked student. And then he gestured mockingly at Akuto with his chin. "Now then. If you understand, why don't you just let us beat the shit out of you?"

"What?"

"You don't get it? We want you to step down from your new position. Plus, it would be fun to make sure you never try to look down on us again."

"You just want a fight."

Akuto started to feel quite irritated.

"This won't be a fight."

On Takeshi's instructions, three of his followers dragged someone out from a bed farther inside.

Akuto felt his heart jump into his throat when he saw the person who was being dragged by the arms and legs like an old rag.

It was Hiroshi. The area around his eyes was swollen up like balls and he had dark bruises on his arms. The areas hidden by his clothes were likely covered in injuries as well.

"A-aniki..." Hiroshi was not unconscious. He looked up at Akuto and spoke in a pained voice. "Don't worry about me. Take care of these guys..."

Takeshi and his followers laughed at that.

"Does this guy think he's in some kind of manga!?"

On Takeshi's instructions, the other boys lowered Hiroshi to the floor.

"To sum it up, if you don't resist, we won't hurt him anymore. I was hoping to get that girl who hangs around with you, but we couldn't find her. But if you fight back or run away from here, I think you can imagine what will happen to her afterwards. You're gonna be living in this school for a long time. You don't want to spend that time in fear, do you?"

Takeshi gave his explanation in a tone that made it clear he saw himself

as a sensible adult.

"I have a question," said Akuto calmly.

"What?"

"You mentioned that this was like a manga. Well, there's one thing I never understood about that." Akuto looked over at Takeshi and the other boys. "Some people have self-inserted themselves into the hero or the villain of the manga or light novels they read, but they give up on that once reality kicks in. Those people that give up find their own way to live their life, and that's fine. But then there are the people who mimic the characters that are utter trash. What are they thinking?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Takeshi must have gotten fed up with the conversation because he gestured at his followers with his chin.

Those boys approached Akuto with thin smiles on their faces.

"How strange. I have never felt more calm. I had always thought I would lose control of myself at times like this, but I guess not."

Akuto waved a hand lightly in front of his waist. It was as if he was using a broom to sweep those boys' legs out from under them.

The boys approaching him suddenly crouched down as their waists

collapsed beneath them. They appeared confused, but then they realized their knees hurt and they could not stand up.

"All I did was break your knees by moving the mana in the atmosphere. You can control mana too, so it all comes down to who has more power. You need to at least put up some resistance." Akuto sounded almost bored as he spoke. He stretched a hand out toward one boy nearby and twisted his hand. This twisted the boy's arm. "I'm moving the mana near your body. You should be able to control it more easily than me, so there's no reason you should be overpowered by me. C'mon, try a little harder. If you don't, I'll break your arm."

After Akuto heard the unpleasant sound of the joint dislocating, he released the boy.

"Wait, don't you understand your position here?"

Takeshi frantically had his followers drag Hiroshi out.

"I do. By targeting those around me instead of me directly, you have left me with no choice. Now that I understand the situation, there is only one thing I can do."

Akuto broke another bone in another boy nearby.

"Y-you don't understand the situation at all!" shouted Takeshi.

"No, I do. I've thought this through. I am ensuring your followers cannot move but are still conscious. That way, they can see what happens next.

They need to see just how horribly their boss suffers.”

Akuto stretched out his hand. Takeshi quickly stood up and moved back while pulling a chain out of his pocket. It must have been made to be used in fights because it was glowing with mana.

Akuto tried to break Takeshi’s legs with mana, but Takeshi moved further back to help him “overpower” Akuto’s attempt. Takeshi had sweat running from his brow, but he managed to withstand Akuto’s pressure.

“Either way, I’m going to take care of you last.”

As soon as Akuto realized Takeshi would not be as easy as the others, he remotely controlled mana to shut the barracks door and looked at the other boys. All their faces became pale.

“I am not actually mad. I simply thought about how to completely prevent you from resisting and went through with it. I hope you won’t hold a grudge. In fact, I will take this far enough that any grudge will disappear, so that won’t be a problem.”

A few minutes after Akuto made that announcement, he and Takeshi were the only two who were left standing. Most of the other boys had collapsed near the wall. They had tried to flee but failed.

And Takeshi was cornered against the wall. He had continued moving back to escape from the pressure of Akuto’s mana manipulation, but his back had reached the wall. He realized he was likely done for and swung his chain horizontally towards Akuto’s face with all his strength.

Akuto did not even try to avoid the approaching chain. The chain struck his face and wrapped around his head.



"Did I get him?"

Takeshi's face lit up, but his smile quickly froze over. The chain was

floating about a centimeter away from Akuto's face.

"He blocked it?"

"Is it really that surprising?" Akuto snatched the chain away, unwrapped it from his face, and tossed it behind him. "Now please don't beg for forgiveness."

Akuto focused mana on the little toe of Takeshi's right foot and bent it backwards. With a small snapping noise, the toe broke. Takeshi screamed and crouched down. Akuto lifted him up in front of him. Takeshi floated in the air as if he was being crucified.

Now that he was sure the immobilized followers could see, Akuto rotated Takeshi's ankle completely around so it faced the opposite direction.

Takeshi's scream echoed throughout the large barracks.

"Stop!" shouted a voice behind Akuto.

Akuto reflexively replied, "I can't stop here. I won't be satisfied until I have scared them a little more than this."

Only after speaking did Akuto realize the voice had been female.

—Oh, no!

Akuto turned around. The barracks door he had closed had been forced open. Junko stood beyond it.

"Damn you! So you've finally shown who you really are! I wondered why you called me out here!"

—Oh, no, no, no, no. What do I do?

"No, they threatened me, so-..."

Sweat poured from Akuto's brow when he realized how unconvincing an argument that was. Someone coming in now would see a boy with a cruel look in his eyes crucifying and tormenting a large thug ranked third in the school while surrounded by about 20 people with broken legs and shoulders, some of whom were bleeding.

"Don't lie! It is obvious who is threatening who here!"

Junko took a defensive stance with the expression of a police officer entering the scene of a mass murder.

"You've got it all wrong! I was only protecting myself."

"No excuses! I know what you are after now! You only became the head public morals officer so you could bring all of this school's thugs under your control! You want to conquer this school so you can influence the students who will later take important positions in the government!"

Junko pointed an accusatory finger at Akuto.

"I-I wasn't thinking anything like that. I swear!"

The thought had truly never even occurred to Akuto, so he the accusation caught him off guard.

"Damn you! Why am I the only one you act so nicely to!? Oh, I get it. You know I am the only highly ranked student who dislikes illegal activities! You wanted me to ally with you so you could deceive the proper students as well!"

Junko was prone to making a lot of assumptions.

—This is never going to end at this rate...

Akuto recalled what Fujiko had told him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the device she had given him to administer those pills. Those pills would allow them to come to an understanding.

—I'll start with myself...

Akuto brought the device to his arm and pulled the trigger.

But nothing happened.

—Eh?

He opened the grip of the device to check inside. The pills were gone.

—What?

The device could not go off on its own, so the pills would not have been volatilized. Also, the device had no hole they could have fallen out through. Akuto panicked, but he had to give up on using the drug if the pills were gone.

“U-um...”

While trying to figure out what to do, Akuto started by lowering Takeshi to the ground. Takeshi let out a short cry of pain and collapsed. Akuto tried to walk toward Junko, but she held her wooden sword up as if he was a ferocious beast.

“S-stay back! If you do not, I will do my best to defeat you even at the risk of my life! Even if I am defeated, I will get at least one strike in! I will show you the spirit of humanity, you demon king!”

“W-wait a second... You don’t have to get so serious.”

Akuto walked forward while spreading his hands to show he had no intention to fight, but Junko moved further back.

“Stay back! I know I cannot match your power! I have no choice but to gather volunteers from around the school to formally punish you!”

"Punish me?"

"Have you not heard of the school's punishment system!? I suppose you wouldn't have! But that does not matter! We will use that system against you! Justice will prevail!"

Junko must have been very frightened because her hands were trembling as she pulled a ball out from her pocket. Akuto immediately recognized it as the smoke bombs used by the ninja, the combat group of the Suhara followers.

"No, wait..."

Akuto stepped forward to stop Junko, but that only made her rush things.

"Eee! I-I said to stay back!"

She tried to throw the smoke bomb and step back at the same moment and tripped over one of the collapsed delinquents.

The smoke bomb slipped from her hand.

"Ah... Oh, no..."

Junko seemed flustered as the smoke bomb struck the floor and loudly exploded a few moments later.

"Eeee!" screamed Junko as white smoke spread out.

"Wah!"

Akuto instinctually moved away.

His field of vision was filled with pure white and a strong unpleasant odor filled his nose.

The air was quite still in that basement room, so it took a while for the smoke to clear. By the time it grew thin enough to see, Junko was nowhere to be seen.

"What am I supposed to do?" muttered Akuto as he scratched at his head.

Takeshi, his followers, and Hiroshi were all lying collapsed on the floor. Almost all of that was Akuto's doing.

—But...

Akuto was bothered by the fact that he had never "lost control of himself" while attacking Takeshi. He had been trying to act rationally and did not see what other option he had had.

—This is a problem... But I do see how this could look like the actions of a demon king. And I'm sure it will all be blamed on me... What a pain...

Akuto silently complained while returning to the entrance of the underground labyrinth. Once there, he reactivated Korone.

She had no memories of being switched off, so she immediately said, "Now, let's go check out the basement."

He told her they would visit the old barracks. She would be able to heal the injured, but that meant he would have to tell her the truth. While walking back there, Akuto racked his brain for a way to explain it to her.

Part 4

"In other words, you did all sorts of things while I was deactivated?" asked Korone.

"Sorry."

Akuto bowed his head.

They were in his dorm room. Korone was on the bed while Akuto was prostrated on the floor. He had explained most of what had happened up to now.

"I have no records of the incident, so I cannot punish you. However, I still think you should take responsibility for this problem related to Hattori Junko," said Korone indifferently.

"I intend to. The problem is..."

"Obediently accepting this punishment would be one way of doing so."

The academy had a punishment system. This was of course the first Akuto had heard of it, but most of the other students had never heard of it either. It was a relic of the war that still remained in the school rules.

If anyone took actions that would harm the school, their crime would be made public and they must accept a duel from any number of people.

The system had likely been created to deal with traitors or spies.

"Allowing the accused a chance to fight does sound like a manly system, but..."

"It is a custom from a more savage time," agreed Korone.

Now that Akuto had been designated under the system, he would be forced into a duel with (i.e. be attacked by) Junko and the students she managed to gather.

"As for my crimes...well, I suppose I've done enough."

Takeshi and the others' injuries had been recorded by Korone. Plus, Junko would have already reported it to the teachers regardless.

"But at the same time...what if I win? Wouldn't that just make all this worse?" asked Akuto with an earnest expression.

"That is why I suggested obediently accepting the punishment," said Korone with an equally earnest expression.

"Is that really my only option? I tried speaking with a teacher, but that didn't help."

He had of course spoken with Mitsuko-sensei as soon as he knew what was happening. Her answer had been simple. Her eyes had lit up as she

said the following:

"You're going to die? Are you really going to die? That's a huge deal! Oh, I'm so excited! Please give me a special front row seat to watch on! I'll make sure to bring you back with necromancy the instant you die!"

This was always the case, but it was now even more obvious that the difference between her and a black magician was that she had permission and they did not.

Akuto was more troubled than he had ever been before.

"So would anyone become a demon king if they had enough power? Ahh... Is cursing destiny my only option?"

Someone else was cursing destiny at the same moment.

It was Junko.

She was sitting seiza-style on top of the tatami mats laid out in her room. She was wearing a traditional white Japanese outfit. She focused her mind while holding a calligraphy brush in front of some Japanese paper.

"Father, Mother, Grandmother. Please forgive my actions. This is for the sake of justice and our country. However, I still must curse destiny for placing me here at this time. No, perhaps I should rejoice that I can

defeat the future demon king while he is still weak.”

She muttered some ideas for what she should write in her will. However, her emotions grew as she spoke and she was alone, so her words gradually shifted over to nothing but complaints.

“Ahh...And I thought he was actually a decent guy. I can’t believe he is such a horrible person. I took such a liking to him at first and I had never seen a guy like him before, so I was so surprised to hear he was a demon king. But now I see he has the perfect personality for it. And why does he know just what to say and do to hurt me the most? I may be strong, but I am clumsy, faint-hearted, and only put on a show of being so tough. I hate those people who love getting into fights and try to do the right thing, but I never did anything about Kimura Takeshi and did not have the courage to volunteer as a public morals officer. ...How could he do all that so easily? And he’s strong too... No, this makes it sound like I care about him. Don’t be ridiculous. I might die tomorrow, so I need to write my will. Let’s see...”

Junko reached for the inkstone to put ink on the brush, but she could not quite reach it.

“Oh, come on...”

She stretched her arm out as far she could and ended up looking up at the ceiling. Her gaze naturally left the inkstone. Then her fingertips touched it.

“Oh, there it is.”

Junko tried to bring it toward her, but something seemed off. It was closer than it should have been.

"What?"

She tilted her head in confusion.

The inkstone was clearly closer than where she had seen it. It had moved toward her hand.

"Eh?"

Junko looked around, but no one was there.

"Wh-what?"

Still confused, she returned to writing her will.

Fujiko had seen what happened in the old barracks using a Monitor. It was a tiny hidden camera, shaped like a winged insect. Such devices were of course illegal, but Fujiko had made this one herself. She had seen everything, from Akuto's violence to the missing pills, in the crystal ball located in her hidden room. Up to Akuto's attempt to use the drug, everything had gone according to her plan. However...

"That is very strange," she said to her brother in the glass container.

"Is it?"

"Yes. The disappearance of those pills ruins my plans." Fujiko thoughtfully brought a hand to her chin. "But...he was so calm in his violence. And he mistakenly views his actions as justified. Don't you think he is very well suited to being a demon king?" Fujiko almost seemed entranced as she spoke to no one in particular. "If only I could make him mine without using that drug."

Chapter 5: The Menacing Optimist

Part 1

A depressing morning came for Akuto.

The entire school had been abuzz with excitement since before dawn. The talk of the punishment system being brought into effect had spread the previous night. How exactly it would be carried out had spread via a variety of methods including telepathic communications and posters.

Anyone who reports their intentions may take part in the punishment.

The punishment will take place only within the hour long lunch break.

If the target of punishment escapes within the school, his or her crimes will be ignored.

Even if the target of punishment is killed, the other participants will not be charged with a crime.

Aiding the target of punishment is permitted, but anyone who does so will be treated identically to the target of punishment.

"So I just have to escape from every student in the school during the lunch break."

Akuto had mentally prepared himself during the night. As he walked to the dining hall for breakfast, a path opened in the waves of people before him so quickly even Moses would have been jealous.

—This is the most they've ever hated...no, feared me.

This was quite a shock to Akuto. But once he took his seat, he heard an excited voice that was filled with so much affection it bordered on

worship.

"A-aniki! I will aid you! I, Hiroshi, will risk my life to protect you!"

Hiroshi was bowing down despite his wounds not being completely healed.

Akuto turned around with a smile, but immediately rejected the offer.

"No, you shouldn't do that. You don't have to die."

"But I know this only happened because you were trying to save me..."

Hiroshi shed truly apologetic tears.

"And that's exactly why I don't want you to die here. I can easily escape them, so let's keep this more carefree," said Akuto while trying to keep his voice as carefree as possible.

After hearing that, Hiroshi had no choice but to back off.

However...

—Y'know, that probably sounded like a challenge to everyone else...

Akuto glanced around at the other students who were glaring at him coldly.

Even after he went to school and classes began, everyone was restless. Akuto was no different. As class continued, he could feel the tension building.

—I need to make sure Hiroshi quickly gets out of the way.

He began mentally simulating the situation.

—Should I jump out the classroom window? I don't want to get anyone in the class hurt. Oh, come to think of it, Keena isn't here today either. How insensitive...

Akuto glanced around while thinking.

The class would be over in 5 minutes.

His classmates' expressions were filled with an odd tension. Most of them wanted nothing to do with the punishment because they did not want to get hurt, but a few boys who were secret fans of Junko's were giving off obvious killing intent.

And on top of it all, Mitsuko-sensei was incredibly excited, so the class was nothing more than reading the textbook.

One minute to go.

Students from other classes began gathering outside the class. Either

their classes had let out early or their last class before the lunch break had been cancelled. The highly motivated upperclassmen were likely either friends of Takeshi's who had not been present the day before or people ranked lower than #4.

—People are getting way too excited about this.

A bitter smile appeared on Akuto's face, but the countdown had already begun.

"Aniki..." said Hiroshi worriedly.

"Don't worry about me. You need to run away immediately," replied Akuto.

Mitsuko-sensei then made an unnecessary comment.

"The chime will be the signal. No moving before that. Five, four..."

She counted down while watching the clock.

And then the chime rang.

"Okay, class is over for..."

Before Mitsuko-sensei could finish, a throwing knife, a blowgun dart, a normal dart, and a magic bullet all flew straight toward Akuto. He

created a mana screen around him, kicked off of his desk, and jumped for the window.

The mana screen stopped most of the attacks, but the magic bullet which was made of pure mana broke through the screen and hit his leg. Akuto lost his balance and crashed through the window. He fell toward the schoolyard along with shards of glass.

—But I stopped those attacks so easily yesterday... Am I not as focused now? Do I have to be angry like I was yesterday?

Akuto was confused, but he did not have time to think. His back slammed into the ground. Akuto had more than enough magic power, but he had not been taught how to use it. Akuto was painfully reminded just how inexperienced he was. The attacking students used flight magic to fly down from the window.

—But I can't fly!

Akuto ran toward the mountain behind the school. He thought he would have an easier time of running away there, but that turned out to be a huge mistake. He clearly lacked an understanding of what it meant to be able to fly. The students immediately spotted him from up in the air and started firing all sorts of projectiles at him.

—Wah! I guess going in the woods isn't going to cut it!

Akuto turned around to head back to the school building, but several pursuers were running in his direction.

—Dammit. Most of those are just onlookers!

“Don’t get hurt!” shouted Akuto as he fired mana straight forward where it violently exploded.

He spotted a few people flying through the air, but he did not have time to see whether they had been blown away by the blast or if they had used flight magic to escape.

He charged through the center of the explosion and back into the school building. There were a lot more students running around, onlookers and otherwise, but he would have an easier time attacking his pursuers in the limited space of the hallways.

“Outta the way!”

He ran through the unfamiliar school building while focusing on knocking people out of his way. Not even ten minutes had passed, but he was already out of breath. He looked for somewhere to hide, but someone would see him wherever he went. Most of the onlookers were not exactly allies.

Once he could no longer run and had to slow to a quick walk, he would be overtaken. He was forced to wander around the school like a cat that could not find its way home.

—Are they moving as a group?

As he wandered around, doubts started to enter Akuto's mind. A few pursuers had attacked forcefully, but had not pursued him far. It seemed he was being led somewhere.

Finally, Akuto made it to the roof. It contained a large lawn used as a sports ground, but the roof was still the roof. It had an edge.

—So I'm cornered.

Akuto had no choice but to make up his mind. When he reached the edge and turned around, he found himself surrounded by a crowd. His pursuers definitely had an excellent strategist who had used the fact that he could not fly to corner him. And that strategist was...

Junko walked forward from the crowd. He had expected to see killer intent in her eyes, but he instead saw a desperate resolution. She held a real sword instead of a wooden one.

"This is when I would want to challenge you to a one-on-one duel, but there is no shame in having help against someone with your power. Remember that others will come after me even if you avoid my sword."

Junko held her sword up in the Hasso Kamae.

"Please stop this... Although I suppose it's too late for that."

Akuto gave a powerless smile.

Junko nodded and said, "Yes, it is much too late."

Junko then chanted a spell under her breath. Her body blurred and the same type of copy as before began to appear. However, her body did not simply split in two this time. Two additional Junkos appeared beyond that.

The total of four Junkos faced Akuto and began to charge forward.



—I can't avoid all four. And I doubt I can reflect all of them either.

He felt he would have been able to defend this attack when he had subconsciously sent his mana out of control or when he had been trembling with anger, but he could not block these real swords now. Akuto could instinctually feel that.

"Kiaaaaaaaahhh!"

The four Junkos leapt toward him simultaneously. Four different slashes assaulted him from four different directions.

—Tch!

Akuto avoided one and tried to turn aside the tips of the others with mana.

But just as he had expected, he did not manage to completely stop them. A scrap of cloth was sliced from his uniform and blood flew through the air. One of the swords had grazed him.

"Uuh...!"

Akuto staggered and leaned on the fence around the roof. The tips of four swords pressed up against his throat.

"This ends here," said all four Junkos in a cold tone.

"I really don't think I've done anything horrible enough to warrant this," groaned Akuto in pain.

Junko's expression grew cloudy.

"Then you need to change the way you think. No, you will not even

have the chance to do so. I saw you trying to control others through violence. Do you not understand how much of a crime that is?"

"Oh...that."

Akuto now understood.

The fact that he had held no doubts about that before may have meant he really did have the personality of a demon king. If he had simply given into his anger and beaten up those delinquents, he would not have been called a demon king no matter how powerful he might be.

"But it just seems that's the kind of personality I have."

"Then unfortunately, you must die," said Junko.

Akuto could hardly believe it, but he began thinking he might actually have to prepare for death.

But then...

"You may not be able to change your personality, but you can change your way of thinking," shouted a cheerful voice from overhead.

Akuto and the four Junkos looked up in shock.

Keena was floating there. When she noticed Akuto looking up at her,

she frantically held her skirt down and landed on the rooftop. Keena held her hands together behind her back and gave a smile that did not suit the atmosphere of the situation in the slightest.

"Keena?"

"Wh-what are you doing here!?"

Keena ignored Akuto and Junko's surprise and spread her arms wide. She then spoke in an entranced voice as if she was reading poetry.

"The two of you are true friends. You do not need to hurt each other."

"What nonsense are you talking about now?"

"That's right. We were just about to..."

"No. After all, haven't you two been paying an excessive amount of attention to each other?"

Keena was speaking so loudly that Akuto and Junko were completely taken aback.

"Eh?"

"W-wait a second..."

"No! I know the truth. A-chan is very diligent and works so earnestly when it comes to helping others. He just wants to show off to others a bit while he does so, and that backfired."

"Hey..." said Akuto in shock.

"And Junko-chan saw through to that side of A-chan and really did want to get along with him, but she had to worry about her reputation. Junko-chan is also jealous of A-chan's strength and how he so readily does the right thing. I know all of this!"

"W-wait!"

All four Junkos blushed.

"The two of you may be a bit clumsy, but you are true friends. And that means you must not fight!" said Keena in a voice that reverberated across the roof.

All maliciousness had left Akuto and Junko. Junko was now hanging her head down and blushing.

"Tch... I have lost my motivation. I back out of this fight." Junko's copies disappeared and the real one looked away from Akuto. "Do not listen to what Keena says. She has no idea what she is talking about."

Akuto gave a bitter grin while holding his wound.

"I won't...in fact, I was never going to. By the way, this hardly resolves everything."

Akuto looked at the crowd of students surrounding him.

A few of them were giving off an intense aura of murderous intent.

"True. Everyone else's anger will not be cooled just because I leave the fight," said Junko.

However, Junko was not aware that the murderous ones were mostly her hidden fans.

—Either way, I'm about to be killed here. Honestly...

Akuto complained in his heart. It should have been obvious that Keena's speech was not going to resolve everything.

"Do you need a helper?" asked Junko as she turned toward Akuto just slightly.

Akuto shook his head.

"Don't joke. You're the one that started this fight."

"And I admit I went too far!" Junko turned completely toward Akuto. "So let me help you!"

"Letting you be killed here would be getting my priorities completely backwards."

"I'm trying to tell you I won't let that happen!"

"But you're weaker than me..."

"Are you trying to make me angry again!?"

Junko and Akuto's argument seemed to heat up the crowd even further. An impatient anger filled them.

And then...

"Don't worry!" shouted Keena.

"Eh?"

Akuto and Junko looked toward Keena, assuming she had no plan whatsoever. Keena confidently placed her hands on her hips and spoke.

"If everyone eats rice together, everything will be okay!"

Both Akuto and Junko held their head in their hands.

"Are you still going on about that?"



"Can you please do something about this idiot?"

But Keena was not discouraged.

"No! Rice is the best thing in the world. Now, Korone-chan!"

With that last comment, Keena raised her hand. Akuto looked down and saw Korone holding a bazooka-like device on the ground below.

"Eh?"

Korone suddenly fired some sort of shell from the bazooka-like device. It shot into the air while trailing smoke and then burst near the roof.

—That's the device for disseminating medicine she mentioned.

Akuto recalled what Korone had said during that ridiculous conversation.

"Did she put rice in that?"

Keena nodded.

"Now everyone in the school has rice! We can all get along!" she exclaimed.

A dark expression came to Akuto and Junko's faces.

"We're done..."

"Yes, we are."

The two prepared themselves and faced the crowd.

However...

"What?"

The crowd had clearly calmed down. They were enthralled by the light – that is, rice – that was raining down on them from the sky.

"It can't be..."

"Impossible..."

Akuto and Junko were both dumbfounded. Keena was the only one celebrating.

"Yay! Yay! Rice really does make everyone get along!"

—No, they look less like they're "getting along" and more like...

Akuto had noticed a change come over the crowd. The way those who had fallen under the effects of Korone's bazooka were acting, he could only assume they were under the effects of some sort of drug.

"Ah...Ah ha ha ha ha ha..."

"Are you feeling a lot better all of a sudden too?"

"Ah...this is amazing! I feel so good!"

They were all saying similar things.

"Wh-what is going on?"

Akuto immediately put up a mana barrier. Junko and Keena were inside the barrier as well.

He watched the crowd in amazement as they started to wander off somewhere like a crowd of zombies. They were leaving the roof.

"Should we follow them?"

Junko wrapped an arm around Akuto's shoulder to help him up. Akuto held his wound as he stood.

As they followed the crowd, the crowd's numbers grew and grew. It seemed they were all heading for the girls' dorm.

"What is going on?"

Part 2

Akuto tilted his head in confusion, but he received his answer before long.

The crowd gathered around the girls' dorm. The girls of course entered the dorm. The boys who were not allowed in only shouted from outside.

"Etou Fujiko-sama! Please let us see you! Let us see you even if only for a moment!"

The girls must have been surrounding Fujiko's room. Shouts of "Fujiko-sama!" could be heard from within.

"Wh-what?"

Akuto and Junko were utterly confused, but then Korone approached from behind.

"This is the effect of a drug. Keena-san, did you put anything in here other than rice?"

"Yeah, I put in a drug I found," readily answered Keena.

—A drug she found? ...Don't tell me it was those pills Etou-senpai gave me!

"Found? Found where?" asked Akuto and Keena once again readily answered.

"In your room."

When he saw Keena smiling innocently, he could not ask her any more questions. But what if she had been aware of everything and swiped the pills from Akuto's pocket?

—If she did steal the pills, was it when Korone warned me on the stairs? If Keena had turned invisible and followed me...

"What does this drug do?" Akuto asked Korone.

"It is not a drug meant to be disseminated like this, so I can only speculate. However, it is currently causing those affected to fall in love with a specified individual. It was weakened when disseminated, so the original drug may have had a different effect."

—So was I tricked by Etou-senpai? No, this doesn't prove that. I still need to be careful, though.

Many different suspicions filled Akuto's head. If he and Junko had been affected by that drug even more intensely, would they have fallen under Fujiko's control? If so, Keena had saved them without telling them anything.

"Wh-why did you put that drug in there?"

"Ehh? Because I heard it would make people get along."

"You were following me back then?"

"Yes. Sorry about not telling you. I hope you aren't mad."

"Th-then was Etou-senpai trying to trick me?"

"Why would she? Etou-senpai is a good person."

Akuto could not tell how much Keena knew or how much she had done on purpose.

—Oh, whatever. At any rate...

"When will this wear off?" Akuto asked Korone.

"I predict the effects will be gone by nightfall."

As Korone predicted, the girls' dorm was surrounded until nightfall. Akuto could not imagine what was going on inside. He could hear Fujiko screaming and he could see the boys outside shedding tears of joy whenever they heard her.

And of course, the issue related to Akuto was never fully resolved. The drug seemed to have affected the minds of the students to a certain

extent, so they could not remember most of what had happened that day. They had returned to how they were before they came to hate Akuto so much.

By the time Fujiko had learned of her plan's failure, the girls' dorm was already surrounded by students. She had of course been monitoring Akuto, so she knew why this was: Korone had scattered her drug around.

"So he saw right through my plan!"

That was a misunderstanding, but it was only natural that Fujiko believed it.

"He truly is a demon king! Now that he has seen through to who I am, I can no longer worry about appearances! I must make him mine and bring ruin to this world as soon as possible!"

Fujiko pulled out her grudge notebook to add both complaints about Akuto and another plan, but the sounds of the commotion outside coming from her crystal ball brought her back to her senses.

The female students had already made their way into the girls' dorm. She looked away from the crystal ball and found her door was being pounded on so hard she feared it would be broken down.

"Fujiko-sama! Fujiko-sama! Fujiko-sama!"

"Embrace me!"

She could hear the girls calling for her. Apparently, the drug's effects had taken an odd turn due to being disseminated.

"I-I need to bring an end to this commotion..."

Fujiko brought her hand to her door's lock. The drug was supposed to make people do what she said, so even in this altered form, she assumed she could calm down the crowd.

However, an avalanche of girls poured into the room as soon as she unlocked the door.

"Whaaat!?"

Fujiko was quickly buried in girls.

"Ahh, Fujiko-samaaa!"

"I truly love you!"

"I have always wanted to do this, Fujiko-sama!"

Arms reached from every direction and groped every inch of Fujiko's body. And in the process, all of her clothes were stripped from her.

“Noooo! Stop this!” shouted Fujiko, but her screams seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Ahhh, such a beautiful voice! Please cry for us even more!”

The voltage of the girls around her only continued to grow.

“Stoooppp! Do not touch me there!”

“Ahh! Yes! Yes! You are so wonderful!”

“Eeeee!”

Fujiko was crushed among all those girls even after being stripped nude. Her hell continued until nightfall.

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

Part 3

"By the way."

After the commotion had died down, Akuto was sitting in his room thinking with his arms crossed. The biggest remaining question was what Keena had been thinking.

"What were you thinking?"

Akuto chose the obvious route of just asking her.

"Rice is so delicious," answered Keena.

She had a rice cooker in front of her and she was scooping white rice directly from it with a large spoon.

Akuto had bought the rice cooker. He had viewed it as an investment to find out what Keena had been thinking, but he was unsure if it had been of any use.

And then a knock came from his window.

The window opened and Junko stuck her head inside.

"Girls shouldn't come to the guys' dorm!" she shouted while pointing at Keena.

"You're here too, Junko-chan," complained Keena.

"I have not entered yet! I am only standing outside!"

"Ehh? So why are you here?" asked Keena while pouting.

Junko blushed and mumbled a bit.

"Sh-shut up!" She then pointed at Akuto. "I have decided I have no choice but to make sure you remain on the correct path! I will train you so you cannot do anything wrong! Prepare yourself!" She now turned back toward Keena. "More importantly, Keena! You turned invisible and went in my room, didn't you!"

"How can you say that? You have no proof."

Keena brought another spoonful of rice to her mouth.

"Proof? Well, how did you know what I said to myself!?"

"You mean what you were muttering about A-chan? I didn't hear that."

Keena's words only made Junko blush further.

"Yes, you did! You had to have! No, wait. You do not have to repeat what I said! Silence! I get it! I will not press you any further about this!"

Junko and Keena began arguing loudly right next to Akuto.

He held his head in his hands and said, "Ahh, what is going to happen to me...?"

"If you could know that, then you really would be a demon king. Are you sure you want that?" said Korone in response to his rhetorical question.

"Aniki! Wanna play a game, aniki!?" shouted Hiroshi from outside the door.

Akuto's school life had only just begun, but he was almost certain things would grow even more troublesome.

And Akuto was not the only person concerned about his school life.

Mitsuko-sensei and the student council president faced each other in the reception space prepared in the faculty room. The short yet imposing president did not change her attitude even when speaking with a teacher.

"Um, now that Etou Fujiko thinks Sai Akuto knows who she is, black magicians are probably going to enter this school," complained the president.

"I do not know exactly what happened 100 years ago, but I wonder if

this will turn out similarly," said Mitsuko-sensei while pouting.

"I do not know, but I think we can manage," said the president with a dry laugh.

"At any rate, just because he is a demon king does not mean he is clearly defined as either good or evil. Try to handle this so he does not join either side."

"Sensei, this will not be that easy. If Hattori-san's parents show up to confront the black magicians, he will probably join her side."

"You just have to coordinate things so that does not happen."

"The student council president is not almighty! And there is one other thing that bothers me."

"What is that?"

"Soga Keena. Who is she?" asked the president as if her words held special meaning.

However, Mitsuko-sensei merely tilted her head.

"I don't know. She's a normal student. Just a normal student," she said with a grin.

Afterword

I don't know if I should say "Thank you!" or "Welcome!", but this is Mizuki Shoutarou. How are you getting by? I'm doing okay, I guess.

This may be sudden, but someone I used to know was a genius at finding terrible restaurants. I don't just mean he would recommend restaurants that he remembered not being all that good when he tried them on a whim. Although that is amazing in and of itself. Even when he would bring you to a high-class restaurant that he said was really good, that had a luxurious atmosphere with bronze statues, and that was quite expensive, the food would always end up being terrible.

People have different tastes, but everyone he would bring with him would complain that the food was terrible and too expensive. Then again, he thought the food was good, so I suppose it's even truer that people have different tastes. How strange.

And that's all well and good, but I learned something from that:

Worrying about how bad the food is won't help!

Once you learn that, things get a lot easier. When people worry too much about where to go when they eat out, they often end up mad about the service or food of the restaurant they choose. This is because those people are viewing eating out as something special. If they got rid of those expectations, they could enjoy it more. Take it far enough, and you can even celebrate terrible food.

This is terrible! How did they make something so bad? I'm impressed!

If you can think like that, you can start actively searching out bad restaurants. You get more points if it isn't a chain restaurant or a cheap place. Cafes that just serve premade meals don't count either. You need that surprise that someone actually cooked the food. You want to avoid something trying to be like a sweet spaghetti or something that tries too hard to be original. If you do that, you will find surprisingly few places.

For example, there's this one restaurant I found...oh, I guess I can't write about it publicly!

At any rate, there are a lot of different kinds of restaurants, but here are some of the names I gave the dishes I was most impressed with.

Mystery cheese pie.

Motsunabe from the pot of hell.

Hairtail that died in a traffic accident.

Those are the big three in my mind.

And those restaurants still get business.

If you find any restaurants like this, please send me a letter about it. Especially if it is in Kantou. I will probably go try the place out.

Okay, time to talk about the novel.

I hope you enjoy reading it, but you do not need to read too deeply into anything.

I put a lot of energy into writing this, so thank you for picking it up.

There isn't much I have to say about this novel, so I'll end this here. I am glad you bought the novel. There are no definite plans yet, but I want to keep these novels coming as a series. I need your help for that and I will do my best not to betray your expectations.

Now to give my thanks.

First, my illustrator, Itou Souichi-san. I am very thankful for the amazing illustrations. Just from the people who saw the roughs, Keena is already very popular.

Next, my editor, Ohashi-san. I am thankful you were willing to work with me over the New Year's holiday for this. I hope to finish things with a little more time to spare next time.

Lastly, I give my thanks to everyone else involved.

Now, let's enjoy the novel!



み01-02-02

水城正太郎

いちばんうろの大魔王ACT2

HJ文庫

HOBBY
JAPAN



学園の秘密に挑む阿九斗の前に
立ちはだかるのは……!?

「だけど、ボクは自分の信じることのために
キミを通すわけにはいかない」

「それなら……」





「傍から見たら
完全な悪役だと
思うんだよね」

登場人物紹介

さいあ九斗

真面目で善良なはずなのに将来「魔王」になると予言されてしまった主人公。

もが
曾我け一な

落ちこぼれな天然少女。勘違いから阿九斗に懐いてしまう。

こるね

政府から派遣された人造人間。阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう。

はっとりやん
服部絢子

一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗のことが気になっているが、常にすれ違ってしまう。

えとろふじ
江藤不三子

学園を裏から操る黒魔術師。阿九斗の力を手に入れようと画策するが……。

Prologue

Her earliest memories were filled with her older brother.

Due to their large age gap, her brother had doted on her. He had done everything she wanted. He had gone along with her self-indulgences as much as he was able and had put his little sister ahead of himself.

Naturally, that alone would not be enough for her memories of her brother to be so strong.

He had died just when she reached the age when she became more aware of the world around her.

She had constantly wanted to remember her brother, so she had started to associate her brother with any enjoyable memory of the past. Eventually, she began fabricating convenient memories for this purpose. She began to confuse the brother in her memories with her image of the ideal male, so she created a strong, stylish, and kind mental image of her brother.

Everyone fabricates memories in this way, but they cause no problems because they rarely come to the surface. However, she saw her lies fall apart in a rather intense fashion. And it happened when she was a sensitive young girl.

She belonged to a well-known old family. She was to attend the prestigious Constant Magic Academy and learn the truth regarding her brother according to the "family custom".

“Fujiko, you must become the head of the Etou family. You must take the place of that pathetic brother of yours who failed and lost his life!”

Etou Fujiko felt something was horribly off about her mother’s cold words.

—But wasn’t my brother our family’s treasure? Didn’t he have excellent grades but died in an unfortunate accident? Didn’t mother never mention him because it was too sad?

She had several questions, but instead of answering them, her mother had silently grabbed her hand and taken her to the mansion’s basement. She had always been told never to enter the basement. She had tried to go there out of curiosity a few times in the past, but it had always been locked.

Her mother had pulled out an old key and opened the basement door. Cold air had escaped, but the basement had not been even slightly dusty. It had obviously been frequently used surprisingly recently.

What she had seen there had been a cruel sight for a girl who was soon to enter middle school.

Her brother’s corpse had been sealed in a glass case. Unlike the brother in her memories, he had looked thin and unreliable. This was partially due to how much Fujiko had grown since her brother’s death, but it had more to do with how much she had idealized her image of him. She had not felt fear, but a corpse was still a corpse. He had appeared to be only sleeping, but the look on his face had clearly not been that of a living

human. Fujiko had been unable to approach him. Simply put, she had been at a sensitive and cleanliness-obsessed age, so she had found the corpse to be “filthy”.

“You must not tell anyone what I tell you here. You must never tell anyone,” said Fujiko’s mother after circling around behind her.

Fujiko had turned around and looked up at her mother. She had seen an expression that was not quite anger and not quite sorrow. She had never seen this expression before. Her mother had held an orb made of light magic in her left hand and it had cast deep shadows across her face. Fujiko’s face had twisted in fear and her mother had violently tightened the right hand holding Fujiko’s shoulder.

“You must not cry! You must look at him!”

Fujiko had begun trembling without saying a word. Her mother’s grip on her shoulder had loosened, but her mother had continued speaking with the same look on her face.

“Each generation of the Etou family holds a position as a Muleet surveyor. Being a surveyor is an important job for a follower of the god Muleet. A surveyor is an adventurer who travels to many different places and provides our god with a report on the situation there. And yet he...”

Her mother had turned the magic light orb out toward the glass coffin. Fujiko’s young heart had felt it was cruel to refer to her brother as “he” rather than by name.

“When excavating some ruins in the academy, he saw something there. It scared him so badly that he abandoned his job and fled! I do not know what it is he found. However, it was likely nothing more than an average monster or some illusion triggered by a trap... Pathetic. He was truly pathetic. He ultimately failed to excavate the ruins. He was forced to take responsibility and had necromancy cast on him during an official trial. That is normally only done to have a criminal confess about his past! We were fortunately spared having to go to the trial...but it seems he truly did only see an illusion caused by a trap. He had always been a timid boy. He would always play with you and your dolls. ...Your entry into the academy is the final judgment. That will also be when we can finally stop storing his body in our basement.”

Her mother’s words had ended there. Fujiko had looked up to find tears running down her mother’s face. Fujiko had been unable to comprehend the complicated emotions of an adult. Fujiko’s heart had been filled within nothing but fear, cruelty, and irrationality.

—My brother was pathetic, but kind. He was a sad excuse of a man, but he died due to his weakness. This school must be a scary place, but this is what happens if I lose. If I am weak, something horrible will happen to me. There is something wrong with a god that allows such horrible things to happen. My brother was kind...no, pathetic, but no matter how pathetic and weak he may have been, that is no reason for him to die. Even the gods betray us. If I am weak, mother will treat me the same way... I must be strong. I must be strong...even if I am a girl.

From then on, Fujiko had always held those chaotic feelings deep in her heart.

Once she had entered the magic academy, she had never shown her true feelings to anyone. She had acted modest and graceful (because her

high-class upbringing had told her that was how a “strong” woman acted), but had secretly been zealous in her studies of both normal magic and black magic. By teaching herself necromancy and stealing a portion of her brother’s corpse, she had successfully resurrected his head. That had taught her anew that what her mother had told her was true, but this no longer discouraged her. In time, Fujiko grew to be the school’s madonna and the strongest member of its delinquents. If nothing out of the ordinary had happened, she may have influenced history as both a surveyor and a spy for the black magicians.

However, her destiny greatly changed when that demon king arrived at the school.

Chapter 1: Do You Like Solitary Confinement?

Part 1

Sai Akuto was having trouble with the hands-on training for beginner magic. Students formed pairs in the schoolyard and played catch with balls formed from mana, the foundation of all types of magical power. However, it was not what he had to do that was causing Akuto trouble. He was standing alone in the schoolyard and no one would approach him.

—I guess my bad reputation isn't going to disappear overnight.

Akuto was unsure what expression to take at a time like this and ended up with one of bitter disgust. He was very attractive, but he had a natural mean look in his eyes that gave him a villainous look. His expression was making it harder for anyone to approach him than just his reputation, but he did not realize it.

—It's been like this ever since it was predicted I would become the demon king. Honestly, is there no upside to this at all?

His bad luck had started when a prediction said to have 100% accuracy had said he would become the demon king in the future. From that moment on, every student in the school had hated and feared him at first sight and made all sorts of misunderstandings about him. He was even under observation by the government. Naturally, he was not living a normal school life.

Even so, Akuto did have a friend: Miwa Hiroshi. He was a boy with a mischievous look about him and he praised Akuto as his "aniki" despite them being the same age. However, today Hiroshi had said "Aniki, I am

nowhere near worthy of being your partner.." before running off.

—What do you mean "nowhere near worthy"? Still, I can't rely on Hiroshi for everything. Maybe I can find a replacement partner.

With that optimistic thought, Akuto began looking around. All of his classmates lined up in the schoolyard looked away when he turned in their direction. However, he spotted two people discussing something out of the corner of his eye. It was the class rep, Hattori Junko, and their homeroom teacher, Torii Mitsuko. They were both quite energetic – or rather, were not holding back – so Akuto could hear their conversation from a good distance away.

"Sai Akuto-kun needs to learn how to control his magic, so will you help him?" asked Mitsuko-sensei.

She was tall, had unruly hair, and wore round glasses. She was obviously a sociable woman.

"No, I will not," flatly refused Junko.

She had a cool and noble beauty, but she often had a sharp look in her eyes and could be quite stubborn.

"But I can't ask anyone else. You're the class rep, remember? You're also powerful in your own right."

Mitsuko-sensei did not back down, but Junko was not about to give up either.

"Even my strength has its limits. Who would choose to be his magic training partner?"

"But it's his first time and this is something he has to experience eventually. Don't you think it would be nice if you were his first?" said Mitsuko-sensei teasingly.

Junko's face grew red.

"Have you no shame, sensei!? Why are you saying something so indecent!?"

"C'mon, I was talking about today's lesson. What did you believe I meant?"

"I know what you were talking about. Just please stop joking around..."

Junko quickly lowered her voice to a whisper and glanced over toward Akuto. He waved back at her and she suddenly grew angry.

"Do not eavesdrop on us, Sai Akuto!"

—But you were talking loud enough for everyone to hear...

Akuto kept that thought to himself and slowly lowered his hand.

Junko walked over to him with long strides.

Akuto prepared himself for an angry complaint, but Junko pointed straight at his face and shouted, "If you heard us, then what are you standing around for!? Hurry up and get ready!"

"Eh?"

"I said get ready!"

As Junko spoke while looking around at the other students, Akuto finally caught on.

"Th-thank you."

Akuto was so thankful he grabbed Junko's hands. This was the pathetic sight of the friendless boy being overly excited about a girl showing him a bit of kindness, but Akuto was so tall that the other students could only think he was seducing her.

The students watching on whispered among themselves.

"The demon king's at it again..."

"I guess the class rep really has fallen completely under his control."

Junko must have heard them because she blushed and jerked her hands

out of Akuto's grasp.

"I said go get ready!"

"Okay. And sorry. That isn't what I meant to happen."

Akuto had also heard the voices of the other students, so he backed away in preparation for their magic training.

"Hey, wait," called out Junko.

"What is it?"

"I need to warn you, so listen up. This lesson is meant to teach gentle control over mana by throwing a mana ball back and forth. This is truly the most basic of lessons and the rest of us mastered it in middle school. However, it can still be dangerous if you do not take it seriously or you stop focusing. And the danger falls on your partner rather than yourself. I hope you understand that."

Akuto nodded in response to Junko's warning.

"Understood. I would never hurt you," he replied with a serious expression.

Junko's blushed once more.

"I thought I told you to stop saying such conceited things!"

—I was only saying what I honestly felt...

Akuto silently complained and moved away from Junko. He turned to face her at a distance of about a dozen meters.

"Here I go," said Junko as she raised her right hand.

A ball-sized orb of light appeared in her hand.

Magic worked by controlling the mana that filled the air. A generator facility in the center of the imperial capital sent energy into the earth itself. That energy was made to resonate with the mana, so mana and energy were often thought of as the same thing. The mana would then accumulate in the bodies of living things and energy could be drawn out from there. Different people held different amounts of mana and it was easier to affect the mana in the atmosphere with more mana inside one's body. The human will was transformed into electricity in the brain, that electricity controlled the mana in the body, and that resonated with the external mana. That meant one's natural level of internal mana and one's ability to focus were what mattered most when using magic. This lesson was meant to train the students' ability to focus.

"Catch it."

Junko lightly moved her right wrist. The mana ball flew in a gentle parabola toward Akuto.

He raised his right hand. Junko must have mastered this level of control because he did not even need to adjust his hand. The mana ball landed softly in his palm.

"Imagine lightly tossing a ball. Now throw it back. Remember, nice and slow."

Junko held out her right hand in order to catch the ball.

"So I just have to do what you did?" asked Akuto and Junko nodded. "Okay then."

Akuto lightly swung his right hand.

—Just a slight flick of the wrist...

As previously stated, the more mana someone was born with, the more of an effect they had on the mana in the atmosphere.

And that meant...

With a tremendous bang, the mana ball sliced through the air. It almost looked like he had fired a rifle at Junko.

"Ee!"

Junko let out a shriek, but she was known as the strongest in their year.

She held her hands out in an attempt to stop the speeding mana ball. However, it was moving so quickly it would likely break her arms and then send her flying backwards.

—Not good!

Akuto knew he had to do something before the mana ball smashed into Junko.

And his thoughts were immediately transferred to the mana ball.

The mana ball exploded in every direction just as Junko tried to catch it.

A great flash of light enveloped Junko before growing into a perfect mushroom cloud in the middle of the schoolyard.

Their classmates began muttering among themselves once more.

Once the smoke cleared, a small crater could be seen.

Junko was sitting on the ground in the center of it.

"Wha-...? Wha-...?"

Junko's eyes were opened wide with anger and shock. She seemed unharmed. That had to be a side effect of Akuto's strong desire to not harm her.

"This is why I didn't want to do this! You have no idea how to hold back!"

Junko stood up and pointed accusingly at Akuto.

And then she froze in place.

Every inch of Junko's skin grew red when she saw herself.

Her uniform had fallen off of her in pieces.

"Hy-hyaaah!"

Junko was completely nude, so she wrapped her arms around herself and crouched down.

The boys in the class gave their comments:

"Ohh!!"

"Look at that!"

And then the girls gave entirely different comments:

"The poor thing!"

"Boys are so horrible."

Akuto ran over to Junko saying, "I-I'm sorry."

"Idiot! You idiot! Stay back!"

Junko violently shook her head.

"But I can't just leave you like this..."

Akuto removed his uniform's vest and placed it on her back. It was large enough to cover her entire body.

Junko looked up at him in surprise.

"Th-thanks..." she said doubtfully. But once she held the vest closed in front and stood up, her expression stiffened and she glared at Akuto.

"No, wait. Why am I thanking you after what happened!?"

"You have a point. This was my fault."

Akuto honestly bowed his head. Whether she was frustrated or embarrassed, Junko clenched her teeth and blushed even more.

"Why are you apologizing so readily!?"

Junko could not take her hands off of the vest or it would open up, so she started kicking Akuto instead of punching him.

"Because I really am sorry. This only happened because of my lack of control."

Akuto hung his head down and let Junko kick him.

After about six kicks, Junko grew even angrier that he was not resisting.



"Why are you letting me kick you!?"

"How many times do I have to say it? This was my fault. Also..."

Akuto pointed at Junko. Whenever she kicked up at Akuto, the bottom of the vest she was wearing would flip up and expose her attractive legs.

"If I moved out of the way, everyone would be able to see your legs," said Akuto while keeping his voice as kind as possible.

For a few seconds, Junko had the look of someone caught off guard. She then continued to kick Akuto with her cheeks dyed in the color of embarrassment.

"Stop that! How much humiliation must you put me through!?"

"Wait. You really should stop moving around so much..."

Their classmates were watching the two of them from a distance. The classmates could not hear their conversation, so they could only speculate what was going.

"Wow... That's the demon king for you. This is just cruel. He tricked her into letting her guard down since it's such a basic magic lesson and then he blasted her clothes off."

"And after stripping her, he gives her his vest... He has to be toying with her."

"And he only gives a slight smile as the class rep tries to resist! He must be trying to help set them straight?"

Only once Akuto mentioned the others did Junko realize their classmates were spreading some sort of rumor about them.

"D-don't tell me this is all part of some evil plan to humiliate me further."

Junko looked frightened and backed away while folding her hands in front of her body.

Akuto immediately denied it.

"No, of course not. As I've said before, I care a lot about you. I want to protect you as much as I can from these rumors that-..."

Before he could finish speaking, Junko's expression grew distorted and tears welled up in her eyes.

"You idiot! Why do you have to act like this!? Are you good or evil!? Choose one side and stick to it! And if you really did care about me, you would-..."

Junko trailed off, looked away from Akuto, and quickly ran off. Akuto did not even have time to try to stop her.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do now?"

Part 2

As Akuto remained standing in confusion, he was approached by Hiroshi who had refused to train with him. The boy was nodding as he always did when admiring something.

"Oh. Nice one, aniki. I am truly impressed."

"What are you talking about?"

"Teasing your woman like that is just so badass. And even in this beginner lesson, you managed to show off your power to the entire class. I only refused to be your partner because I thought you might try something like this."

Hiroshi was not trying to flatter him. He was honestly impressed. His eyes were glittering with pure light.

"There is a lot I want to say to that, but I'm not sure where to even start," complained Akuto.

He then noticed Mitsuko-sensei approaching. She placed her hands on her hips and gave a smile that looked more amused than bitter.

"You need to control your mana properly. Especially with how much power you have." Mitsuko-sensei adjusted her glasses and looked off in the direction Junko had disappeared. "She probably won't be attending her classes for a while. She can be quite pure-hearted."

"I'm sorry."

Akuto honestly lowered his head.

"Apologizing to me isn't going to help. You need to train your mind to make sure this does not happen again."

"Yeah, but wasn't this the beginner lesson for doing just that?" asked Akuto.

Mitsuko-sensei glanced upwards and said, "Yes, it was... Oh! I do know a fairly drastic measure you could take! Yes. It's a bit dangerous, but it's worth trying."

Mitsuko-sensei must have thought this was an excellent idea because she patted Akuto's shoulder looking quite happy.

"Why do you look so overjoyed?" asked Akuto suspiciously.

Mitsuko-sensei's eyes sparkled as she replied, "This school has a mental training technique that no student has gone through in years! It was stopped after it went badly for a few of the students!"

"I have one quick question."

"Don't worry. It isn't physically dangerous or anything. When I say it went badly I just meant it went badly."

"That wasn't my question. I want to know why you look so excited."

When Akuto pointed that out, Mitsuko-sensei wiped drool from her mouth with a look of realization.

"I-it's nothing. It isn't like anyone has died from this in the past or anything."

"I hope that's true..."

Akuto gave Mitsuko-sensei a cold look. He suspected she wanted to kill him in a legal fashion. He appreciated that she understood him to a certain extent rather than blindly fearing him like most of the students did, but she was interested in his powers as the demon king and seemed to want to cast necromancy on him after he died to perform experiments.

"So what kind of training is it?" asked Akuto.

Mitsuko-sensei nodded and replied, "It is known as the Mental Training Room. It is similar to the Zen meditation performed by Suhara followers."

Mitsuko-sensei's words seemed to shock Hiroshi.

"Eh!? Constant Magic Academy's famous Mental Training Room!?"

"Is it dangerous?" asked Akuto curiously.

Hiroshi looked like he was telling a ghost story as he continued.

"Yeah. Years ago, a student died while they were-...mgh."

Hiroshi was cut off when Mitsuko-sensei covered his mouth.

"Eh heh heh heh heh heh. Don't worry. You'll be fine. It's no problem at all."

She laughed, but not even Akuto was that dull.

"I think I'll pass..."

But Mitsuko-sensei quickly added, "Oh, um, I said it was like the Zen meditation performed by Suhara followers, right? If Hattori-san knew you had completed this training, she might forgive you."

This was nothing more than a desperate attempt to convince Akuto, but it was enough.

—I see. She might be right...

"In that case..."

Akuto returned to his dorm room after school. A look of displeasure

appeared on his face when he saw the girl lying on his bed.

She had soft green hair, a beautiful face with doll-like perfection, and a body so ideal one would think an artist had sculpted it. However, she was lying on the bed and reading a manga magazine while munching on ningyou-yaki from a bag lying next to her. Despite her beauty, she was acting like a middle-aged housewife or an unemployed youth.

She was an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam and her name was Korone. She was an observer sent by the government. After it had been determined Akuto would become the demon king, she had been sent to live in his dorm room to observe him at all times.

"So you are back. It seems nothing out of the ordinary happened," said Korone without even looking toward Akuto.

Akuto could not help but be annoyed. Korone had originally followed him around 24/7, but she would occasionally disappear lately. And despite being an artificial human who never grew tired, he would always find her skipping out on her duties during those times.

"Are you even observing me? I think what happened in class qualifies as out of the ordinary."

"Do not worry. No one was injured," declared Korone.

"You saw it?" he asked doubtfully, but Korone did not hesitate.

"Yes. I can now monitor you remotely and I can arrive instantly no

matter where I am.”

As she spoke, Korone brought another ningyou-yaki to her mouth. This bothered Akuto an odd amount.

“Those are ningyou-yaki, right? Specifically, the seaweed ones from the capital?”

“Yes. Would you like one?”

“No, thanks. More importantly, can an artificial human eat?”

“I can. A chemical change inside my body converts it into energy. Only an insignificant amount, though.”

“You don’t have to do that, right? So why are you eating those?”

“Because they are delicious.”

“That’s the only reason?”

“Yes. And I will not gain weight no matter how much I eat.”

“Well, you are an artificial human, so would gaining weight bother you?”

“No, and that is why I will not gain weight.”

"Eh? Eh?"

Speaking with Korone often left Akuto confused. She liked to tease people with an apathetic demeanor. Akuto decided to ignore Korone and began searching for what he needed for his training.

"What are you doing?" asked Korone.

Akuto had no choice but to tell her about the Mental Training Room that Mitsuko-sensei had told him about. Korone unexpectedly stopped grabbing another ningyou-yaki and spoke.

"I will go with you."

"Eh?"

"I will go with you as your observer."

"Why?"

"Because it sounds fun."

Part 3

"...Even though you're always skipping out on your duty?"

"Is that a problem?"

"...No, not really."

Akuto gathered his gear. All he needed was a metal canteen and a waterproof bag. Mitsuko-sensei had told him he would need both.

After putting the canteen in the waterproof bag, he headed to the place Mitsuko-sensei had told him to go. Korone followed him.

"This place appears to be relatively uninhabited."

Korone was right. Akuto had been told to go to the area beyond a pond near the school building. It had been made into a garden for the students to relax in, but the dense thicket surrounding the area and the humidity from the pond kept most people away. It was wrapped in the same atmosphere as the poorly tended garden of a mansion in a declining rural area.

"Yes, I doubt many people would want to come here."

Akuto parted the thicket with his hands and walked across the disorderly grass. Eventually, he arrived at a square building with plaster walls. Each side was only as wide as someone's arm span. The door was

so short he would have to crouch down to pass through and he would likely only be able to sit inside.

"I see. There really isn't much you could use this for besides mental training," said Akuto in an odd sort of admiration.

He crouched down and placed his hand on the door. The knob lit up and an artificial voice spoke.

<Once you enter this door, it will lock and cannot be opened from within for 12 hours. Prepare a means of emergency contact and then enter at your own risk.>

"So that's how it works," commented Korone.

"Seems that way. I guess I'll see you in 12 hours. I'll contact you with my student handbook's mana communication in an emergency."

Akuto nodded toward Korone and opened the door. The space surrounded by plaster walls contained nothing but tatami mats on the floor. He entered the cool and stale air and then shut the door.

"Why would you need to contact me in an emergency?"

"So you can open the door to let me out," said Akuto before realizing something was wrong. He turned to the side and found Korone. And the door had fully shut. "What are you doing in here with me!?"

"I said I would be going with you as your observer," she said calmly.

Akuto sighed. It was a small space for two. He doubted he could train his mind much like this.

—And I was actually looking forward to spending some time alone in here.

No outside light was let inside, so the only illumination was some dimly glowing mana covering the ceiling. Akuto looked around and spotted tiny writing covering every inch of the wall opposite the door. He looked closer and could tell some lengthy text had been carved there. Reading it in the dim light would prove difficult. When he focused mana in his fingertip to produce some light and read through a bit of it, he realized it was a portion of the imperial constitution.

—So this entire wall is covered in the preamble to the constitution. To read it all in this darkness, I need to control my mana to produce light. That must be how I train my mind.

"I was a bit worried, but I don't see how anyone could die as a result. It should be exhausting though."

Feeling relieved, Akuto sat on the tatami mats.

"Yes. There seem to be some strange rumors, but they must all be unfounded. Not even modern Suhara followers use this old-fashioned mental focusing technique. This room may have become a legend after people stopped using it."

With that comment, Korone sat down as well. The area was so small that Akuto and Korone's knees were forced against each other. Korone adjusted her position, but there was no other choice but to sit right up next to Akuto.

"Um..."

"Yes?"

"This place is cramped."

"Yes, it is."

"I meant that as a complaint."

"Your complaint will not make this room any larger or me any smaller."

"..."

"Please do not fall silent. Didn't you come here to train? Go right ahead and read the constitution on the wall there. It should be tedious, but this is training."

Korone sounded quite disagreeable. And she of course remained without emotion.

Akuto reluctantly looked over to the wall and focused on controlling the mana light, but then he noticed Korone slowly bringing her body closer to his.

"Um..."

"Yes?"

"Could you move away some?"

"I am helping you with your training. You must be able to concentrate even in this sort of situation."

Korone pressed her body up against his. She was an artificial human, but the soft sensation was identical to that of a real human. Akuto could not help but be distracted. He looked over at Korone, but she only stared back at him. The situation could not have been more awkward. He looked down and noticed that all of Korone's moving around had left her skirt just disheveled enough for her panties to become slightly visible. He now had no idea what to do.

"I don't need your help!"

Akuto crawled across the tatami mats on his knees to move away from Korone. The room was small, but there was enough space to leave a slight gap between the two of them. However, he felt a feminine body in the direction he fled as well.

"You circled around to the other side?"

Akuto looked over to complain further, but no one was there.

"?"

He turned around in confusion, but Korone was still in the same spot as before.

"I did not circle around."

"Eh?"

Akuto cautiously reached a hand out into empty space. He felt something soft like a leather bag filled with water but a bit more firm.

"Ahhh!"

A scream came from empty air.

—Crap, I was right.

Having figured out what was going on, Akuto glared into the empty space.

"Keena, what are you doing in here?"

A long, drawn-out voice answered, "Because I heard you would be staying in here on your own, A-chan. I thought you needed a bento."

Akuto glanced upwards and saw something floating in midair. It was a bento wrapped in cloth.

"But why would you come in with me?" he grumbled.

The girl speaking to him from a seemingly empty space was Soga Keena. She was a failing student who wasn't very good at magic, so she always skipped out on the magic lessons. However, she somehow specialized in invisibility and flight, which required an excessive amount of focus for normal people. That was why she had a habit of turning herself invisible and floating around.

"Because the door closed on me," complained Keena as she made herself visible.

Her blazing red hair was her most noticeable characteristic. She wore her hair up and a few tufts stood straight up like antennae. Her face could be called gentle or vacant depending on one's opinion of her. Just looking at her had a way of inducing drowsiness.

However, the most noticeable feature at the moment was not her face; it was her lack of clothing. Keena's small breasts were floating fully exposed right in front of Akuto's eyes.

"W-wait a second!"

Akuto panicked and then Keena realized what she had done.

"Kyaaaah!"

She folded up her arms and legs to cover herself.

Keena could only make herself invisible. She had to strip naked before disappearing, but she often forgot about her state of undress when she became visible again.

"It's dark in here, so I can't see anything clearly," said Akuto as he looked around.

He could not find anything else for Keena to wear, so he was forced to take off his own shirt and give it to her.

"I have a feeling I'm going to lose all of my clothes before long," he complained.

"My uniform would be too small," said Korone. She then glanced between Akuto and Keena before saying, "This room is quite small."

"How could you be so calm? This is kind of a big deal. We're all trapped in here for 12 hours."

Akuto held his head in his hands. All three of them had been inside from the beginning, but it felt a lot more cramped now that he could see Keena.

Nevertheless, Korone remained calm.

"It is no problem for me."

"Of course it isn't for you," said Akuto with a bit of anger mixed in.

"Calm down," said Keena soothingly. "Don't get mad, A-chan. Here, you get in a bad mood when you're hungry."

Keena held out the wrapped bento while wearing only a shirt.

"I don't think it has anything to do with hunger this time," argued Akuto, but Keena was not listening.

"Don't worry. You'll forget all about it once your stomach is full."

Keena smiled. Akuto was not sure how to respond. It was not that Keena had convinced him. It had more to do with how the dim light allowed him to vaguely see Keena wearing nothing but his shirt.

"No...um...I'll eat later."

Akuto averted his gaze.

"You need to train. You need to focus your mind," said Korone with intentionally bad timing.

"Shut up!" he shouted.

But he then calmed his mind and thought.

—Come to think of it, this actually is a good opportunity to focus my mind. I need to work on this training.

If he focused too much on the two bodies pressing up against him from either side, he would never get anything done. Akuto decided to focus on the small words of the constitution. He lit some mana light from his finger and forced his face up against the wall.

—Now, then. Time to start reading. Having no escape might actually help.

In only a few minutes, Akuto managed to fully focus on the text. But after a few minutes, he felt someone poking at his side.

"Ugh...What is it?"

Unsurprisingly, it was Keena poking him.

"Hey. Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

"...Aren't you hungry?"

"I said no."

".....Aren't you hungry?" asked Keena with a tilt of the head.

"Fine, I get it. You want to eat the bento, don't you?"

Akuto sighed and moved his head away from the wall. For some reason, he had a weakness when it came to Keena. While he was not particularly strong when it came to other girls, he could not resist at all when it came to Keena. He always gave in no matter what she did. Akuto guessed it had to do with knowing her from back in his orphanage days. Something about Keena prevented Akuto from opposing her.

Keena opened the bento. It contained several white rice balls.

"What's this one?" asked Akuto while pointing at one on the end.

"A rice ball!" replied Keena happily.

"I know that, but what kind."

"An excellent question! This is that brand with over 1000 years of tradition: Akitakomachi!" forcefully announced Keena.

"Okay, that's the brand of the rice. But what's inside?"

"I already told you: Akitakomachi."

"Eh?"

"It has Akitakomachi rice inside. The rice ball is made of Koshihikari."

"Oh...I see."

Akuto lost all will to resist and took a bite of the rice ball. If he just thought of it as a plain rice ball, it was good enough.

"The blend of the rice is the best part! Changing the ratio can turn it into an entirely different food! For example..."

Keena began extolling the wonders of white rice, but Akuto was used to this. He went back to reading the constitution while only half listening to her. Oddly enough, having Keena rambling in the background acted like background music and made it easier to concentrate.

—I see. Magical concentration is nothing special. I can just concentrate the same way I did at my part-time jobs when I was poor. I was going all out because this was magic, but I guess I was overthinking it.

As he was lost in his thoughts, a grain of rice flew from behind him and stuck to the word he was just about to read. He turned around to find that Keena had noticed he was not listening to her enthusiastic speech. She ate a rice ball while complaining loudly.

"After going on about all of that crap, you should be more careful with your rice," he said as he grabbed the grain of rice off of the wall.

The grain of rice had stuck to the wall like glue, but it should not have been difficult to remove. However, Akuto noticed something odd. It felt like a portion of the wall came off with the grain.

"What?"

He looked more closely at the wall there. It seemed a piece of paper had been attached to the wall and then the words of the constitution it covered up had been written on top of it to hide the paper's existence.

Akuto peeled off the paper. It was parchment. Normal paper could be found anywhere, so parchment was rarely used.

The parchment had a map and some text on it. All of the lines had been burned into the parchment with magic. It would have been faster to write it out by hand, so someone had gone out of their way to ensure it would last. Someone had placed it here in the hopes that someone would eventually find it.

"This would be a lot of effort for a simple prank," commented Akuto.

Keena's eyes sparkles as she peered at the parchment in Akuto's hand.

"Hey, is that a treasure map, A-chan!?" she said excitedly.

"Don't be silly. This isn't...huh?"

Part 4

Akuto read the writing and, to his surprise, it really was a treasure map. Below the reliably drawn map, the following words were written:

<To the brave one who has found this map. The sealed treasure will reveal itself when the three hidden keys are gathered from the three locations marked on this map. But do not forget: any who know what the treasure is will always be searching for it. Only those with a selfless heart and those willing to risk their life should search for the treasure. Those without these qualifications will find only death. This is not a threat. It is my final request as I head to my death. -K >

The K at the end was a signature. Whoever that initial belonged to did not seem to be joking around, but none of the more important information was mentioned.

"What is this?" said Akuto in puzzlement.

"Ah!" said Keena. "This is a map of the school!"

"Eh? It is?"

Akuto checked the map. He was new enough at the school that he had not initially noticed, but it did seem the school grounds were drawn on the map.

"It can be hard to tell because of how large the school grounds are, but

this is the school building, this is the forest out back, and this is the mountain you can see from the roof.”

Keena pointed at various points on the map, but it still did not quite hit home for Akuto because he had never walked around the entire school grounds. And then Korone finally spoke up.

“The scale of the map is arbitrary, but it shows an area approximately 40 kilometers across. It would take two hours with flight magic or half a day by foot.”

“I see. How old is the parchment?” asked Akuto.

“If you are asking when the parchment itself was made, quite old. It is around 50 years old. If you are asking about the writing, I cannot say as the change was made with magic,” analyzed Korone instantly.

“So it’s no more than 50 years old. And we know nothing more than that.”

“It could have been written yesterday or 50 years ago.”

“Hm. It’s a bit interesting, but it doesn’t really matter to me. It might have been here for years since no one uses this place, but someone might have put it here today as a prank when they heard I would be using it.”

With that coolheaded comment, Akuto tried to put the map back where it had been. However, Keena snatched it from him.

"This is a treasure map, A-chan!"

Keena looked like she was in a dream.

"I know," he replied bluntly.

"Treasures are filled with dreams. Just imagine. Pirates of ancient times probably spent all their lives gathering this treasure."

Keena clasped her hands together in front of her chest and looked off in an odd direction.

"This has been a landlocked area for over 4000 years," pointed out Akuto, but she was not listening.

"Ahh, if only I was a boy! I would go out and face any danger! I would fight the monsters protecting the keys and defeat them all! But I would not kill them. If I killed them, I would lose the right to take the treasure! That is where all the strong adventurers before me failed!"

Akuto had forgotten that Keena could not be stopped once she fell into one of her delusions. If you went along with it, there would be no end of it. He had believed one of her delusions when they first met and had paid for it.

"Yeah, that would be nice," he said offhandedly and returned to his training.

But he received an unexpected reply.

"A-chan..."

Keena had suddenly grown meek and was fidgeting around. Akuto could not help but find this odd.

"What is it?"

Keena trembled as if trying to endure something.

"I gotta pee."

"Wait, wait, wait..."

Akuto was not sure what to do. He looked around and spotted the canteen and waterproof bag he had brought with him.

"So, that's what the bag is for for!"

The canteen contained water. Going 12 hours without water was dangerous. And if he was trapped in here for 12 hours...

"Here, use this."

Akuto held out the waterproof bag.

"Ehh!? No! That's too embarrassing!" argued Keena.



"It's better than wetting yourself! Just face away from me!"

"No!"

"It's embarrassing for me too! I might not be able to hold it either at some point!"

"I don't want that either! I don't want to see you do that!"

As Akuto and Keena argued, Korone suddenly spoke up.

"If you need a means of disposing of your urine, I can drink it."

Unsurprisingly, both Akuto and Keena's argument froze over when the two of them heard that.

"Eh?"

"W-wait..."

But Korone only calmly said, "Do not worry. A chemical change inside my body will convert it into energy. Only an insignificant amount, though."

"That is not the issue here!"

"Waaaahhhhn! No! Let me out!" cried Keena.

When Korone saw that, she only shrugged apathetically.

"That was a joke. For one, it does not taste good."

"Regardless, that does not resolve this situation! And how do you know how it tastes?"

Afterwards, Akuto could not remember what had happened then. He simply assumed they somehow solved the problem with magic.

When Akuto awoke the next morning, he retrieved the map from Korone who was lying in the covered shelf near the roof. If he had left it out, Keena would likely have taken it, so he had left it with Korone. He of course had no intention of doing anything with it. To avoid any trouble, he planned to discuss it with the student council president.

After arriving at school, Akuto stopped by the student council room before class. The president always held a meeting with the other officers before classes began and he was cheerfully invited in. Akuto was the head public morals officer, so his position required close coordination with the student council.

"What is it, Sai-kun?" asked the president sociably.

She wore her usual stylish hat that seemed to be her trademark. She was short and had a youthful appearance. She almost looked like a pre-teen, but she was actually a third year. Despite how she looked, she was oddly intimidating. Akuto had heard nothing about how powerful she was, but since she was the student council president in a school that was so fixated on using magic in combat related situations, she was probably very skilled.

Akuto showed her the map. When he explained how he had found it, the president's eyes widened slightly. But then she glanced between Akuto and the map in disinterest.

"It's probably some childish prank."

"I think so too, but some of the students might try to attempt a treasure hunt if this gets out."

The president smiled at that.

"You have a point. I will hold onto it, then. Please keep this confidential."

The president then glanced over at the three officers. They gathered around the president's desk.

"Sorry, but we always have plenty of work in the morning," she said with a shooing motion.

Akuto bowed and left the room. As he did, he could hear the three officers talking loudly.

"President, isn't this a map of the school, gya?"

"I think it is, guga."

"Some of the areas abandoned during the war are marked, arinsu."

From the odd ways they spoke, Akuto decided they must all be oddly individual people, but he could no longer hear them as soon as he

stepped outside. They seemed to be using some sort of magic to prevent their voices from reaching outside, but Akuto did not mind.

Junko wouldn't attend class and Keena was skipping as always.

—Keena is one thing, but what is Hattori-san doing?

By the time the first class ended, Akuto was holding his head in worry, but then he noticed a commotion out in the hallway. It wasn't often he came across a commotion that had nothing to do with him. He walked out of the classroom and found a crowd of students gathered around the wall.

—What is this? Wait, it can't be!

Akuto approached the wall and the students gathered there moved aside to make a path for him with tremendous speed. However, Akuto did not have time to worry about how much they feared him. A copy of the map had been placed on the wall.

—Keena!

He could think of no other possibility. As Akuto stood there dumbfounded, Hiroshi ran over to him.

"Aniki! What's with this treasure map? Keena-chan has been putting it up everywhere. Is this a prank?" asked Hiroshi.

Akuto now had no doubt that Keena was responsible. She had the ability to make herself invisible, so she would have been able to steal the map at some point, copy it, and then return it.

"This is no prank," Akuto said with his voice raised.

He wanted everyone around him to hear him. Hiroshi decided to raise his voice too.

"It's not a prank!? Then it's a game you've prepared, isn't it!? I see! You hid the treasure and then placed monsters at each of these points! Then you'll take in anyone who clears the game as your followers!"

Hiroshi's assumption caused a stir among the surrounding students. Akuto panicked. He didn't want yet another rumor spreading around.

"That is not what this is," he denied.

However, Hiroshi only raised his voice further.

"Then is it a real map you found, aniki!?"

"No. I have no idea whether it's real or not."

He tried to deny it, but he found it hard to find the words when he did not know any of the facts himself.

"What am I supposed to do?" he muttered.

It had already spread, so suppressing it was a lost cause. He got a very bad feeling when his classmates were oddly excited even as class started, but there was nothing he could do.

—I can only hope this really is just a prank.

But the situation took an odd turn after that.

Towards the end of lunch period, a stretcher carrying someone flew by in front of Akuto as he was returning to the classroom after having lunch with Hiroshi. The flying device was used to carry the injured to the infirmary. This school produced a lot of injuries and this device was used to transport anyone too badly injured to move on their own. This stretcher carried a male student. He was conscious, but his face was horribly pale and he was muttering, "A monster..."

"Don't tell me..." said Akuto.

"He probably went treasure hunting," replied Hiroshi.

Hiroshi ran off, found a friend of the injured boy from within the crowd of onlookers, and asked that friend what happened. Hiroshi acted quickly with this sort of thing.

"Some of the students who are especially good at flight flew off to go

treasure hunting and came back with serious injuries! This thing is the real deal!"

Hiroshi sounded excited.

—No, this isn't normal.

Akuto silently folded his arms as he thought. He must have had a rather serious look because the students around him ran away in fear and Hiroshi rejoiced that Akuto had made some sort of decision. However, Akuto himself did not notice any of this.

Part 5

Akuto was not the only one who felt something odd about this treasure map.

Etou Fujiko did as well.

On the surface, she was the academy's greatest beauty, had top grades, was head of the girls' dorm, and was the target of admiration of boys and girls alike. However, she was secretly a black magician who found great pleasure in controlling others. Just the other day, she had put together a scheme to make Akuto hers, but it had backfired on her in a strange way.

Fujiko was currently hiding away from prying eyes in the basement. She had taken a room in the underground labyrinth used during the war and remodeled it for her research in black magic. She always used it when she wanted to be alone, but she was here for a different reason today. Fujiko always kept a bottled severed head in the room. She had used necromancy, forbidden magic, to reanimate her older brother. He was usually good for nothing more than an inane chat, but he was the reason she was here today.

The gloomy room was covered in velvet and Fujiko was showing a copy of that treasure map to the severed head in the glass container.

"This is your handwriting, isn't it?"

"No, I have never seen that map before," immediately replied her brother.

"You can't possibly not know anything about this," denied Fujiko, but she fell silent immediately afterwards.

She understood that necromancy did not truly resurrect the dead. It was nothing more than a system that provided an estimated answer based on the stored records of their past. And that meant a spirit could not lie.

"But I know that this is your handwriting..."

She could not be mistaken about the handwriting of someone so dear to her. However, the rule that spirits could not lie was absolute.

Almost everyone in this country had been baptized into some religion or another. That baptism meant one was under the control of that god. When people said their god was watching, it wasn't a metaphor. The gods used mana to record every action humans took.

"So you truly have no memory of the locations on this map?"

Fujiko changed the question.

Her brother replied that he did not.

—He graduated from the academy, so it is impossible for him to have no memories of it whatsoever.

Was it possible someone had erased the records? The gods treated everyone equally. That meant the path to the blessings of the gods (i.e. the ability to use magic) was open to everyone. However, it was impossible to do anything that affected the gods. The system was made so that the gods themselves would reject any actions that affected them.

"Hey, onii-sama. I am getting a headache, so excuse me."

Sensing something dangerous, Fujiko returned aboveground using a hidden underground passageway. She really was getting a headache. The contradiction revived from the bottom of her heart was causing her quite a bit of trouble.

Once she appeared in the normal hallways, Fujiko's demeanor had transformed into that of the perfect high-class girl. The students chatting with each other during lunch break turned admiring eyes in her direction. When she lowered her head in greeting, they all greeted her as if they were cheering.

That greeting was normal, but Fujiko froze in place when she spotted a certain female student. Fujiko was the girls' dorm leader, so she had memorized what all the girls in the school looked like. Even if she could not immediately recall some of their names, she would recognize them. However, she did not recognize this girl.

This girl had long green hair tied into a ponytail. Her uniform was not worn entirely properly, so she gave an untidy impression. The girl had clear facial features and she was certainly beautiful, but something about her seemed off balance. It was only after reflexively greeting her that Fujiko realized it was due to the girl's eyes and overall expression showing her emotions too clearly.

"Good day," said Fujiko with a bow.

The girl's eyes opened wide and she put on a look of deep interest.

"Good day? Now you are interesting!"

"Oh? Am I?" replied Fujiko with a smile and sensing danger.

Rather than just being impolite, this girl possessed something that left people uneasy.

The girl laughed loudly and said, "You are! After all, you're not that kind of person! I can tell just from looking at you. You're a cruel witch deep down and there's no saving someone like you."

"H-how rude."

Fujiko just barely managed to maintain her composure, but she was still overpowered by this girl.

"Ah ha ha ha! If you're gonna lie, you can't panic when someone finds out! It's no fun otherwise, Etou Fujiko!"

With that unsophisticated comment, the girl spread her arms and spun around on the spot.

"You're not a student of this academy, are you!?"

Fujiko was certain of that now, so she quickly prepared to fire a mana ball from her right hand. However, the girl jumped back too quickly for her.

"I'm not a student, but I do have permission to enter the academy! Etou Fujiko, if you hide the truth like this, you'll only make more enemies. Like me for example!"

After that comment from the girl, even Fujiko had trouble keeping her expression steady. She ended her attack and remained smiling as she watched the girl leave. The girl ran off quite quickly.

"Onee-sama, who was that girl?"

Students who had heard the commotion gathered worriedly around Fujiko. Fujiko played the role of the high-class girl by placing a hand on her cheek and choosing the words of a victim.

"I do not know. Some strange girl must have snuck into the school. We need to inform the teachers."

For a while afterwards, keeping the facade required some effort.

Meanwhile, Junko was alone in her room after Akuto had blasted her clothes off and she had ran away. She was of course embarrassed to be

stripped of her clothes in front of the entire class, but a night had passed since then and she had been consoled by her friends at dinner the previous night. She had mostly calmed down from that. However, some strange feeling came over her when she was alone and she did not know what to do.

“That idiot! That idiot! That idiot!”

She had spent all day in her futon, but she could not help but flail her limbs around meaninglessly whenever she saw Akuto’s vest sitting on top of that futon. She could have placed it somewhere farther away, but Junko had convinced herself she had nowhere else to put it.

—I need to think about returning it to him. I of course have to thank him, but he will only make fun of me if I sound like an idiot when I do. And how am I supposed to return it anyway? Do I wash it first? It’s just a vest and it isn’t dirty, so it should be fine as is.

Junko picked it up to search for a stain on the inside. That was where it had touched her bare skin, so it would be embarrassing if there was some stain there.

—No, wait. Is it the smell that’s the problem?

Suddenly worried, Junko held the inside of the vest to her face.

—This is his-...

With that sudden realization, Junko’s face explosively reddened and she

took the vest away from her face. After bringing her breathing under control, she stood up from her futon. She then rushed around to every corner of the room swinging her arms around everywhere.

“Soga! Soga Keena! You aren’t spying on me, are you!?”

She had just remembered that Keena had once turned invisible and watched her in her room. After making completely certain no one else was in the room, Junko was finally able to relax. She made sure the door was locked and then sat seiza-style on the futon.

She picked up Akuto’s vest with trembling hands, closed her eyes, and wrapped it around her like she was embracing it. She then slowly brought the inside of the vest up to her face.

—Ah... This feeling...

And then her student handbook rang.

“Hyaaahhh!”

She screamed and jumped a full meter into the air. She frantically made sure no one was looking, but it seemed no one was. She picked up her student handbook and saw she had a message from her family. Junko took a deep breath to calm down and then read it.

She grew perfectly calm in an instant. At first glance, the message seemed innocuous enough, but it was a coded message of the type used by the Hattori family. Once decoded it said the following:

<A member of the Teruya family has taken action. Wait for a meeting at the given location.>

—Is it her?

A stern look entered Junko's eyes. That was a family that hers had a long history with.

Chapter 2: Who is that Girl?

Part 1

Akuto had a bad feeling. However, this was no vague foreboding; it was a grounded prediction. And his unpleasant prediction turned out to be right on target. As he rested in the dorm once night fell, more and more injured students were brought to the dining hall. Only the night shift was in the infirmary, so they could not treat everyone's injuries there.

Akuto had been sipping on some after-dinner tea with Hiroshi and Korone, but more and more tables had to be moved out of the way to fit the male students who were lined up like giant tunas in a fish market. And if this was a fish market, the fishermen must have gotten an excellent haul. The number of injured continued to grow. The students who were followers of Ko Ro and hoped to be doctors rushed around performing first aid.

"This is all because they went treasure hunting, isn't it?" asked Akuto.

"That's right, aniki," replied Hiroshi.

"Why do they feel the need to get injured over something as childish as a treasure hunt?"

As soon as Akuto said that, the dining hall's atmosphere suddenly froze over. The other students thought he was insulting the injured. Looks of anger and hatred gathered on him. After all, the students here valued reckless actions and saw commotions like this as a virtue.

—Crap.

Surprisingly, Akuto was sensitive to that sort of atmosphere. He stood up and walked over to a first year treating the wounds of a second year. He put on his biggest smile as he spoke.

"I am actually a follower of Ko Ro, too. If you tell me how to perform healing magic, I can help. And even if you don't, I can help in some other way."

The two student's faces paled to an even greater extent than if he was some quack of a doctor who would most certainly kill the injured student. They both could only shake their trembling heads.

"You don't need to be afraid of me. I'm not going to hurt you."

Akuto crouched down and the first year performing the healing cried out and ran away. The badly injured second year shouted "I'm healed! I'm healed! I really am!", got down from the table, and hopped away on his one good leg. "O-okay, sorry. I'll just stay out of the way."

Akuto backed away and returned to his seat.

He asked Korone, "Can you help them attend to the injured?"

"Yes. I have been instructed to act according to the wishes of my subject."

Korone began walking around to the different injured students. She was

very popular. All of the injured students frantically waved their hands to draw her over to them as she pulled a healing device out of her bag.

As Akuto watched Korone heal the students one after another, he decided this would make it easier to speak with the injured. He approached a nearby boy and asked a question as gently as possible.

"So were you attacked by something?"

The boy looked shocked, but he responded with an almost sulking look rather than falling silent. He was a large first year who likely took pride in his strength.

"Yes. I was attacked before I even knew what was going on. That thing was powerful."

"Are you sure?" asked Akuto.

The first year and all the others turned to look at Akuto. The delicate atmosphere that had temporarily left fell back over the dining hall.

—I see. They took that to mean anyone who lost to it was just weak. I wasn't sure what to say, so I was simply asking if this thing was really there.

Upon realizing that, Akuto cleared his throat and chose his words carefully.

"My apologies. I was asking if this monster really did exist. After all, look how many of you have been injured. If all of you attacked it together, surely you could handle even a powerful monster."

"We didn't attack it together. We were all separate," said the first year in a blunt but annoyed tone of voice.

"Then did you all attack it at different times?"

"We didn't attack it at all."

"Oh, so it attacked you. But with this many people, couldn't you have joined together then?"

Akuto asked this because he was legitimately curious, but the first year's reply was filled with irritation.

"You don't go treasure hunting in a big group. We all headed out on our own. No team was bigger than two people."

"Oh, that's right!" said Akuto loudly when he finally caught on. "You were treasure hunting! You all wanted to get there ahead of everyone else! My apologies once more. I completely forgot about that! If it hadn't been for that selfishness, such a large number of people would never have been injured!"

The dining hall froze over and silence fell.

—Oh, crap. I said something else that could be taken the wrong way.

Akuto raised his voice so everyone could hear as he tried to smooth things over.

“No, I just wanted to say that you would have had better results if you had worked together. Everyone in this school is a valiant warrior, right? If you had some excellent commander, you would be able to produce quite a bit of power.”

The first year must have been so irritated he no longer cared because his next statement was filled with contempt.

“Shut up. We don’t have anyone to act as a leader.”

“What about the ranking system? If you let the person ranked at the top command you...”

At that point, Akuto realized something. It had not occurred to him until he had already spoken.

—Oh, no. I’m the one that defeated the people at the top of the rankings!

Akuto was unsure of what to say now.

The surrounding students were muttering among themselves.

"Is he saying this would have gone better if he led us?"

"He's saying we should give in to the great demon king."

"Wait, so did the demon king set up this entire thing? Was he planning this?"

"Come to think of it, he was the one that found the map and it was his girl that spread it around."

The situation had taken a turn for the worse. The gazes that gathered on Akuto now were a mixture of cold looks and fearful ones.

Akuto shook his head and stood up.

"That's not what happened! I would gain nothing from doing that! All I have done is point out your weaknesses! However, I had no intention of criticizing you. I simply said you should work together! For example, if everyone shares their information on what they were attacked by, you should be able to work out a strategy for fighting it."

One of Akuto's greatest weaknesses was his bad habit of trying to make himself look good at times like this. However, he did have a decent argument here, so the grumbling injured students gradually began exchanging information with those around them.

"It turned into a fog, so my attacks didn't work."

"That's what got me too. And it was too dark to tell for sure, but I think there were a bunch of bugs flying around. I couldn't figure out where to attack."

"That's right. The fog was the main body that attacked by controlling those bug-things. There was nothing I could do."

As they spoke, they eventually began discussing how to defeat this enemy. The discussion grew quite heated which was fine, but it quickly shifted over to fighting over who would play what role.

"Like I said, the decoy just has to draw the bugs away."

"Yeah, but who acts as the decoy!?"

"Someone who's good at running away."

"Don't be stupid. The decoy has always been the guy with the thickest armor."

"What? Are you saying I'm wrong? And don't call me stupid."

"That's not the point. Your way of thinking will mean we have to change who takes command."

"That's right. Who will take command anyway? Are we going to have a tournament to decide?"

"If we did that, it would end up being a fight over who gets the treasure in the end."

"Well, what's wrong with that? Then we'd know who the truly strong ones are."

Killing intent began to fill the room. Akuto had been the one who created this situation, so he raised his voice to put a stop to it.

"Everyone calm down! You don't need to fight over this. You don't even know if this treasure exists. And even if it does, it seems to have been left there for a long time. How about you just assume there is nothing there? That will bring everything back to how it was beforehand."

But his words only needlessly fanned the flames.

"You're the one who found the map!"

"This isn't about the treasure anymore! We're going to fight that monster to take our revenge!"

The injured students began making a fuss. It rubbed Akuto the wrong way how they had switched over to an objective of revenge. He felt that was nothing more than hiding their own weakness.

"Then why don't you go back on your own and lose again! I can't speak with fools who refuse to face their own weakness! Why do you refuse to work together!?" he shouted in annoyance.

His voice was so loud that everyone in the room froze in place.

—I've done it again...

However, it was too late to stop now. It was in everyone's best interests if he used this situation to bring an end to this treasure hunt.

"The incompetent should not go on risk their lives just to look good! If you want to go, do so after proving your power! Do not sneak around for your own self-interest if you do not have the guts to do that! That is all I wish to say!"

Akuto ended his speech by slamming his hands down on the table. He began sweating from both embarrassment and regret, but after that challenge, he might be attacked in his sleep if he tried to back out now. He straightened his back, glanced forcefully across the entire room, and boldly walked out of the dining hall.

Hiroshi followed him while shedding tears of passion.

"That's my aniki for you! You were so cool!"

"That isn't what I was going for."

"Don't be so modest! ...Oh, I get it! Instead of conquering the academy by force, you plan to get everyone to naturally revere you! And you're teaching them how to make brave decisions on their own! You have such

foresight! I always learn so much from you!"

"Okay... That's good..."

Akuto did not have the energy to argue with Hiroshi, so he continued on as energetic as ever.

"Yes! I'm so glad I've stuck with you! And I of course used a Speaker to broadcast that speech throughout the dorms!"

"To both dorms?"

"Of course!" replied Hiroshi with great satisfaction.

—I can already tell this is going to get a lot worse...

Akuto felt a headache coming on. He soon realized worrying about this would not help, so he stopped thinking about it.

Part 2

The following day, Akuto received a summons in the early morning. It was from the student council president. Akuto was an early enough riser that he was already awake when she contacted him, but the president herself sounded tired. Once he arrived in the student council office, the president was resting her shoulders on her desk and looked like she was about to nod off.

"Sorry about calling you here so early. Um, I heard that speech yesterday. That thrilling one."

Akuto could not tell if she was displeased or just tired, so he was unsure on how to reply. She was a girl yet she looked like an oddly intimidating boy, so her expressions were hard to read.



"That was embarrassing," said Akuto as he bowed his head.

"No, it's all right. It pained me to see all those injuries, too. The reason I have summoned you here is so you can use your authority as head public morals officer to give an official command banning the treasure hunt. You can do so at the morning assembly," explained the president with a yawn.

"An official command?"

"Yes. The public morals committee has the authority and you can punish the students who disobey. Doing so too often would turn this into a reign of terror, of course. At any rate, your speech yesterday more or

less said anyone strong could go. You know how dangerous that is, right?"

"You're right. I apologize for saying all that without permission."

"Nnn, it's not really a big deal. And if you're going to apologize, it should be for breaking your promise not to tell anyone about that map."

"I am sorry about that. I should have watched over it more carefully."

"No, as long as you apologize. And to be honest, it might have gotten out from here."

The president laughed lightly.

When Akuto thought about it, he had left the map with Korone and she would not have let her guard down. That meant Keena would have had to steal it from the student council office. However, he saw no reason to point that out.

"I will take responsibility by announcing the official command," promised Akuto before glancing around the student council office. "Are the three officers not with you?"

"No. They had some minor business to take care of. They'll be back in time for the morning assembly."

The president then drove Akuto out of the room so she could announce

the special morning assembly.

An hour later, the entire student body was lined up in the schoolyard. Both the middle school and high school were there, so it was quite a sight. Akuto and the student council president stood in front of them all. An artificial creature known as a Speaker was floating in the center of the podium placed in the schoolyard, so the words of whoever stood on the podium could be heard by all present company.

—Looks like they aren't here.

Akuto noticed that Junko and Keena were missing from the line of students from Class 1A. He understood that neither of them would want to face Akuto right now, but it still bothered him that they were missing.

As he thought about that, the student council president finished her greeting from atop the podium. However, Akuto had not been lost in thought for all that long. All the president had said was, "Good morning, everyone. Now, the head public morals officer has something to tell you."

Akuto frantically stepped up onto the podium. Most people would be nervous while standing in front of the school's entire student body, but Akuto was not one of those people. He put together the words in his head, gave a short greeting, and began to get to the topic at hand. But what happened next stopped even Akuto from continuing.

"Sai Akutoooo! I just have to prove I'm powerful, right? Then that's what I'll do!"

The next thing Akuto knew, a girl had jumped up from the lines of students. She had long green hair tied into a ponytail. After jumping several meters up into the air, she rotated around with her hair waving around, stuck her right leg out, and then began gliding directly toward Akuto.

“Gooo! Exploding Midair Triangle Kick!” she shouted while focusing mana in her right foot.

As that foot began to glow, it shot straight for Akuto’s face.

—Not good.

Akuto took a step to the right atop the podium. He had enough time to easily evade the kick. However, Akuto quickly realized he had been too naïve. The way the girl had been gliding across at an unnatural trajectory through the air showed she was flying at high speed rather than falling. She was moving at tremendous speed, but she could still control her flight. And as proof, she immediately redirected her kick towards his face.

—Should I knock it aside with my hand? No, then I would lose control of my mana!

Akuto was unsure what to do. He could not allow himself to lose control of his mana and cause an explosion here. However, he could not deflect this kick without using mana.

—That means I have to avoid it at the last second!

Akuto made up his mind almost instantly. If he moved aside now, her foot would simply follow suit. In that case, he would have to move his head out of the way right before the kick landed.

“Take this! Right on target!” shouted the girl confidently.

However, Akuto’s reflexes were better than the girl had expected. He swung his head to the side at the last moment as if turning away from her. He just barely managed to avoid her glowing foot.

“I missed!?” shouted the girl.

—I did it!

Akuto gave an internal cheer.

But in the next instant...

With a silly-sounding squishing noise, Akuto felt something soft on his face. His vision went completely black. For an instant, he was unsure what had happened. His cheeks were strongly trapped between two soft objects. He felt like some soft cloth was covering his head.

“Kyaaah! Wait! No!”

When he heard that scream from above his head, Akuto finally realized what had happened.

The girl was straddling his face. He was still standing, so it was something like a reverse piggyback ride.

"Wah! Wait!"

Akuto could not just throw the girl off of him, so he had no choice but to remain standing where he was.

It must have been a ridiculous sight for anyone watching. And there were plenty of people watching. Basically, Akuto was standing upright with his head stuck up a girl's skirt and his face pressed against her crotch while the entire student body watched on.

"What are you doing, Sai Akuto!?"

The girl must have been unable to concentrate enough to control her mana because she didn't take flight again. She complained to Akuto while working to keep her balance.

"You're the one that tried to kick me!"

"Hyaah! Don't talk! It tickles!"

"Oh, sorr-..."

"I said don't talk! Don't move!"

"I won't, so you climb down!"

"Hyah! I-I'm stuck. I can't move! I'm going to fall!"

"Then don't move. I'll lower you down."

Akuto felt around until he had his hands around the girl's waist, lifted her up to remove her legs from his shoulders, and then tried to lower her down while almost embracing her. The girl slowly slid down his body with her legs wrapped around his body.

But when he had lowered the girl far enough that her face was right in front of his, she tightened her legs around his body so she could not be lowered any further.

"Hurry up and get down," he said.

The girl before him had clear facial features and was very beautiful, but she seemed to show her emotions too clearly so she seemed somehow off balance. This was the same girl who had challenged Fujiko the day before.

"What is it?" asked Akuto in confusion.

The girl's face was only about 10 cm from his. Her breath tickled him.

"You're even more handsome up close," she said as she wrapped her

arms around his neck.

Her legs were still wrapped around his waist, so she was now hanging down in front of him.

"Thanks, but could you get off of me?" said Akuto while feigning calm.

The situation may have just been so strange his senses had numbed over, but not even he was sure. It was also possible his odd desire to look good prevented him from letting him lose his cool in front of others. Either way, he kept his back straight and reacted coolly as this girl embraced him.

"You're quite interesting! Hey, why did you dodge my kick like that?"

The girl had a smile similar to a child who had found a new toy.

In the hopes that she would climb down quickly, Akuto responded to her question while facing away.

"If I tried to block it, I would have lost control over my mana and caused a giant explosion. I just have too much power. Since you were obviously controlling your path, I decided to dodge at the last second. I thought you might have flown behind me and hurt yourself if I had gone the other way. If you understand, then please get down."

However, it seemed Akuto's words had only amused the girl further.

"You're amazing! You thought through all that in just an instant! I've only ever met one other guy like you! Whose woman should I be? If you want, we can do it right here and now."

The girl began thrusting her hips against Akuto. Her crotch was in the perfect position to press up against Akuto's hips, so it was an unquestionably very obscene action.

"Get off of me."

Akuto began to grow a bit flustered and he removed the girl's arms from around his neck. However, the girl's legs were strong enough that she could hang on without her arms. And once she saw an opening, she wrapped her arms around his neck again.

—What is with this girl?

Akuto looked around in hopes of finding help. The student council president only gave an odd bitter smile and spun her arm around to tell him to hurry up and do what he came here to do. Meanwhile, the teachers were too dumbfounded to do anything and the students had turned into a sea of muttering.

"Wait, wait. What is going on...?"

"Don't tell me they're going to do it in front of everyone..."

"I think they might be already."

"I can't tell with the skirt in the way, but is she not wearing any panties under there?"

"But even if he's the demon king, isn't he a bit too calm for that?"

"No, can't villains take a woman without so much as changing their expression?"

"Y-you're right... But seeing this makes me feel like I've lost to him as a guy..."

"He's doing it in front of the entire student body... There's no way we can match that..."

—Wait! What the hell is going on here!?"

Akuto was utterly confused, but he was unable to get too forceful with a girl even in a situation like this. He calmly cleared his throat and shouted as loudly as he could.

"Silence!"

His voice was amplified by the Speaker, so it resounded throughout the schoolyard with a bit of feedback. After gathering the student's attention, he cleared his throat once more. The schoolyard was covered in silence as everyone's attention was directed towards him.

"Everyone! Yesterday, I said you should prove your strength before pursuing the treasure. It seems she took me at my word and challenged me. However, you should think of that as wasted effort."

Akuto had given up on removing the girl and instead spoke with her still hanging onto him. His statement caused another wave of muttering to spread throughout the students.

"I see. He's saying he'll do the same thing to anyone who challenges him."

"He must have used some kind of magic to seduce her."

"Did he do something when he had his face pressed against her crotch?"

Those fearful voices spread through the students.

—No, you misunderstand... But I guess I can't blame any of you. There is something seriously wrong with this girl! Please understand that!

While Akuto shouted internally, he knew that would never resolve the situation. He had to carry out his duty and then step down from the podium as quickly as possible.

"I am using my authority as head public morals officer to ban anyone from attempting the treasure hunt! Anyone who disobeys should expect to be punished! That is all I-..."

As Akuto tried to conclude his statement, he was cut off by the students. They were all booing his ban.

—In a normal situation, I could have phrased it in some way that restrained their dissatisfaction, but I can't persuade anyone like this.

Akuto was troubled, but then he heard a voice from nearby. The girl was speaking up so the Speaker would pick up her voice.

"You can't go back on your word word. If you think we're not good enough, then do it yourself."

The students cheered at that.

Some of them began shouting their support of the idea.

"That's right! Why don't you go and get the treasure!?"

"If you think we're weak, then you should take responsibility!"

"Don't take all the treasure for yourself!"

Akuto was unsure how to handle this hostile reaction, so he turned toward the student council president. The president made a shooing motion as if to say he could do whatever he wanted.

—Well, at least no more students will risk their lives anymore.

Akuto made up his mind.

“Understood. I will go. However, all other students are banned from approaching within one kilometer of the locations marked on the map.”

With that announcement, Akuto stepped down from the podium. Once he did, the girl finally stood on her own two legs. Akuto pointed at her in order to ask the president who the girl was, but the president only shrugged.

“Who are you?” asked Akuto.

The girl shook her ponytail and replied, “Teruya Eiko. I was just wanted to tease you, but it looks like we might get to know each other a lot better. It would be worth remembering my name.”

Part 3

"Just try to do something about it over the weekend starting tomorrow. And if you fail and try to hide it, at least hide it well."

From her attitude, it was clear the student council president did not approve of Akuto going off treasure hunting. After that speech, she had called him to the student council office to lecture him.

"I'm sorry. And I only have to find out what this monster is, don't I? I will be treating that as my goal," he replied.

The three officers (vice president, secretary, and treasurer) had returned and were giving Akuto resentful looks, so he had been trying to defend his case.

However, the three's harsh looks did not disappear. They were all third year girls with an odd intensity to them. The vice president had bold eyebrows and gave a wild impression. The secretary was quite tall for a girl and always seemed to be without emotion. The treasurer was slender and beautiful, but her skin went beyond white and approached being sickly pale.

Akuto could instinctually tell that the three of them were not normal girls and did not want to displease them, but it seemed their moods were not going to improve.

"Don't worry. I won't cause any problems for you," said Akuto once more.

"Oh," began the president as if she had something to say. "Um, if you do fail, we won't tell anyone, so you can just come back. Yes, that's fine. That would be perfectly fine."

She seemed to be vaguely agreeing with him, but...

"You make it sound like you want me to fail," he said in confusion.

She nodded and said, "You can take it that way if you like. We just want to forget any of this ever happened."

"In that case, you should have stopped that strange girl. As the student council president, you should not just ignore something like that," protested Akuto in a fair bit of annoyance.

"Yes, well...you know. I didn't want to interrupt you while you were enjoying yourself," she said hesitantly.

"I was not enjoying myself. What are you even thinking? And who is that girl anyway? She disappeared while I wasn't looking afterwards," said Akuto as he pressed the president for an answer.

The president's cheek twitched slightly and she placed a finger on the brim of her hat. Akuto did not understand what that action meant, but it clearly scared the three officers.

—Eh?

Akuto found it odd, but the president immediately removed her hand from her hat. She tapped the finger on her desk instead while her cheeks tightened in annoyance.

She said, "She may have been wearing one of our uniforms, but she is not a student. I cannot say anything more. There are certain things I am not allowed to say due to my position as student council president. But there is something I want to tell you. I'm not sure if I should call it a warning or a request, but do not let that girl do as she pleases. And try to have some sense. There are some truths that must not be brought to light."

Akuto couldn't understand the president or her attitude. But after being told so bluntly, he had no choice but to obey.

"Understood."

Even after Akuto left the student council office, the president's statement left him with feelings of suspicion.

—I need to make my preparations.

Akuto opened the knapsack he had borrowed from the school's travel supplies and then placed it on his dorm room floor, but the two people standing on either side of the knapsack bothered him more than what he would put inside it.

He had not asked Korone or Hiroshi to come along. Korone was not a problem because she was his observer and could be reliable in a pinch. The problem was Hiroshi.

“I’ll go with you, aniki! I’m prepared to give up my life if you’re in danger!”

Hiroshi continued to expand on his determination at length, but Akuto calmly thought instead of listening to him.

—He’s going to come with me no matter what I say, so telling him not to would be useless. But with that Teruya girl and everything else, there are just too many strange aspects to this. He might come in handy on that side of things, but I’m not sure I can protect him if we’re confronted by the creature. He could easily get hurt in all this.

As Akuto thought on, he finally came to a decision.

“Could you fill this knapsack with some supplies? I have something else I need to take care of,” he said.

Hiroshi seemed deeply moved that he was being relied on, so he ran to get food from the dining hall while half in tears.

—Now then...

After mustering up a small amount of courage, Akuto pulled out his student handbook and began a telepathic conversation.

Half an hour later, Akuto waited quietly in a room of the academy's underground labyrinth. He had been there once before. It was originally a bunker used for conducting strategies during the Great War. It was separated from Fujiko's secret lab by a single wall.

"You certainly have guts. How dare you show yourself before me?" said Fujiko as she appeared before Akuto with a look of displeasure.

"I would not have blamed you had you not come, so thank you for showing up."

Akuto stood up from his chair and bowed his head.

The memories of the incident from the other day had been erased from all of the other students, so only Akuto and Keena were aware of Fujiko's true identity. And it was because Fujiko knew this fact that she had responded to his request.

"Are you planning to threaten me?"

"No, you would not give in to that anyway. Not to mention that nobody would believe me if I tried to reveal your intentions," replied Akuto immediately.

"Then what business do you have with me? I haven't given up on making you my slave," insisted Fujiko with a stiff expression.

However, Akuto simply answered honestly.

"I know. But I think we should have a more normal relationship. A relationship as upperclassman and underclassman."

"You know," Fujiko folded her arms in annoyance and looked down at Akuto. "I would prefer it if you did not view my ambitions as a black magician so lightly. To a black magician, the demon king is the symbol of liberation, but I intend to become someone even greater than the demon king."

"Then you have nothing to worry about because I have no intention of becoming the demon king."

That decisive statement left Fujiko looking disappointed.

"Wh-what do you mean? You saw through my plan and set up a trap for me..."

Instead of pointing out that it had been Keena's odd actions that had done that, Akuto simply stared Fujiko directly in the eye.

"Wh-what is it?" she asked.

"Senpai, I want you to teach me how to use magic in combat. I still lose control over my mana and do not know how to use it properly. And my official lessons are not enough for now."

Akuto spoke in a truly serious manner which left Fujiko shocked.

"So you came to me?"

"Yes. I thought the person I knew who is most used to fighting would be best."

Fujiko gave a cruel smile at that.

"I might lead you into a trap."

"I expect you to, but I still think learning from you would be best."

He was speaking from his heart, so his expression remained serious as he said that. Fujiko looked utterly confused.

"H-how softhearted can you be? Or are you trying to show off how good a person you are?"

"No, I'm not claiming to be anything. I do take my irritation out on others at times. However, I feel that I can trust you."

"That is what I am saying makes you softhearted."

"No, it doesn't. You're a terrible human being. You're selfish and you rely on and abuse power, yet you manipulate others to further your goals. That makes you paranoid. That's why you're hiding in fear."

"Wha-...?"

Fujiko was left speechless.

—Did I go too far? But I'm fairly certain all of this is true.

While silently regretting it, Akuto tried to fix things with his next words.

"As I said before, that is why I am able to trust you. After all, someone who never trusts others will always be working for their own self-interest. So as long as I give something in return, we can make a deal. As for what I will give you in exchange for being taught how to use magic, how about I promise not to make any sort of attack on you? With how much you like planning things out, I think you should find this reasonable."

As Akuto pressed Fujiko for an answer, she slammed her hands on the table in annoyance.

"Don't act like you know what goes on in my head!"

—She insists she is a villain, so I was trying to compliment her villainous side... Maybe I shouldn't have tried to get along with her after analyzing her to that extent.

Akuto folded his arms with a troubled look, but he knew that would never solve anything.

He bowed his head and said, "I apologize for being so rude. But I came here knowing the risks. And you want to make me your slave. This would make me your student, which is similar."

"D-don't say it like that!" shouted Fujiko in a shrill voice as she pounded on the table again. "Fine then! I will teach you what you want to know. I will teach you how to fight! But you cannot complain if I attack you in your sleep now! You are a demon! You are the demon king!"

—I got what I wanted, but it looks like I angered her.

Akuto shrugged.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"What!?"

"Um... Could you stop calling me the demon king?"

"No! You may not accept it, but you do have the potential!"

Fujiko pounded on the desk for a third time.

Part 4

Fujiko then told him to open his student handbook. He was to take notes in it.

“Magic refers to any phenomenon caused by the atmospheric mana reacting to your internal mana. You know that much, correct? Your internal mana reacts to the electrical impulses in your brain. That is simple as well. Now, it is the gods that decide how mana behaves. Energy is released into the earth from the central generation facility, so this is something other than energy. You could say this is like programming the mana.”

Akuto knew that much, but the rest of what she said were things he only vaguely knew about.

“The gods decide how mana behaves. Mana appears to be almighty and that binds it. This causes a problem for the gods. The gods constantly monitor the contents of human brains via mana and log everything they see. That is the simplest way of explaining it. You can think of the gods as computers or as personalities that become the target of worship. Because they monitor people’s feelings, they can give different blessings to different people based on those peoples’ individual actions. The logs themselves are not made public, but you could say they use the convenience of magic to force people into doing good. The god Ko Ro views charity as a virtue and the god Suhara views heroism as a virtue, so they make the magic required for such actions easier to use.”

Normal people simply worshipped their god, but the upper levels of society had transformed it into a system. However, it was not hidden that

this is what the gods were. It was simply that many people did not want to consider it too much. Anyone related to academism knew this and most intellectuals chose to go through the motions of being religious despite knowing better. Doing so allowed them the convenience of magic, so it was well worth their while.

“That is why many graduates of this school ultimately hope to become priests that can influence the ‘system’ of the gods. And it is the black magicians that choose to oppose that system. In other words, we are opposed to being bound to it and want to restore free will. Or at least, that is the goal of the organized black magicians. It is true that there are many who are simply petty criminals.”

Akuto cut in there.

“So how does a demon king fit into all of this?”

“You don't know despite being one yourself? Although I suppose no one would have told you. Every child born in this country is baptized, correct? That baptism is a contract with a god and one cannot use magic without it. However, those who are not baptized are not able to live as normal human beings. The previous demon king questioned that fact. This information is not exactly kept secret either. It just seems that no one cares.”

“And how does this tie into using magic?”

“Certain types of magic require certain qualifications or else their use is considered a crime. However, this does not mean it is impossible for those without the qualifications to use them. For example, one normally

needs a license to use flight magic, but it is taught to everyone in this academy. This type of magic is known as a forbidden spell. Even if you cannot use the spell without the qualifications, you can use it if you trick your god into thinking you are qualified. People who do that are known as black magicians. However, the god still sees that you used the forbidden spell. You can trick your god into thinking you are qualified to use the forbidden spell, but your god will penalize you for it afterwards. In other words, the more often you use black magic, the weaker you become."

"Then is there any point in being a black magician?"

"Not if that was the only option. This is why black magicians had their own god. A god of freedom. A god that did not forbid anything."

"And where is this god?"

"It no longer exists. It was destroyed during the war. It is the dream of all black magicians to recreate it. That is why some black magicians are working to corrupt a high priest. Only a high priest and those around them have the knowledge needed to create a god."

"I see," Akuto nodded.

Fujiko had briefly covered what one would learn in first year lessons.

—But it sounds to me like the black magicians are being selfish too. If I think that differently from them, maybe I really will avoid being the demon king.

Fujiko then finally arrived at the true purpose of the lesson.

"Now, about fighting. I explained all of that because what types of magic you naturally specialize in come from which god's baptism you received and how your mind works."

Fujiko reached for Akuto's student handbook and drew a diagram. She drew four intersecting lines to create a star shape. It was a matrix with eight points at the end of the lines. And she wrote a word at each of the points like the numbers on a clock.

"Illusion", "Healing", "Telekinesis", "Explosion", "Spiritual", "Tool Control", "Religious", and "Transformation".

"These are the eight types of magic one can specialize in. As this diagram suggests, no one can specialize in two types opposite each other. Someone who specializes in illusion magic will have difficulty with spiritual magic. Using that knowledge is one trick to improving your abilities."

"What do you specialize in?"

"Transformation magic. I can change the composition of materials using mana. Those with this specialty can create potions and even change their shape. My specialty is more on the side of creating potions, though. What matters for now is that I have difficulty with explosion magic. We practice every sort of magic in our lessons, but it is best to avoid using your opposite type in a fight because it will be ineffective. You are obviously the opposite of me. You clearly specialize in explosion magic."

"That means I should focus on that, right?"

"Yes. Once we know that much, the next step would normally be practicing until you get the hang of it, but you don't have the time for that."

Fujiko placed a large handgun on the table.

Akuto looked at it in confusion.

"What is that?"

"It is an incantation gun which allows mana to be placed within the bullets. The mana is placed in the bullets ahead of time and the mana's effects show themselves once it is fired. Anyone can use the weapon, but someone who can control their mana well can produce many different effects by regulating the bullet ahead of time."

Fujiko lined up some bullets in front of Akuto.

"Do you always carry this around?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"For starters, I think it's illegal."

"Not in this academy. Everyone here can use magic even more dangerous than this."

Fujiko opened the revolver cylinder and showed him how to use it.

A gap appeared in the conversation there. Something that had been bothering Akuto floated up in the back of his mind.

"You are the dorm leader, right?"

"Yes."

"Then do you know a girl named Teruya Eiko?"

"No, I don't. ...By any chance are you talking about the girl who was clinging to you at the morning assembly?" asked Fujiko as her expression stiffened.

"Do you know anything about her? The student council president said she didn't, but she seems to be hiding something. She even warned me to be careful around her."

A thoughtful expression came over Fujiko.

"That girl confronted me for some reason as well and it had been bothering me."

"Did she attack you?"

"No, she only confronted me. And the only thing I can think of that we have in common is the treasure map."

Fujiko had spoken that last statement while lost in thought, but she quickly silenced herself as if she had said too much. And Akuto didn't overlook it.

"What do you mean? Do you know something about the map?"

Fujiko's expression grew cloudy.

"N-no... I had only suspected that my late brother might have made it."

"Then..."

"I-I was wrong. My brother told me as much."

"Uh... I thought you said he was dead."

"I used necromancy. I'm a black magician, remember?"

Fujiko looked like she was only putting on a strong front as she said that. Her arrogant exterior had simply disappeared.

"If I recall, dead spirits created with necromancy can't lie. Sorry. It must

have been hard on you to use necromancy to speak with your brother.”

After seeing the look on Fujiko’s face Akuto had tried to apologize, but she raised her voice as she grew a bit upset.

“Not at all! He was a horrible person! He disgraced my proud family! I have a lot of memories of him being with me when I was little, but that probably means he was a filthy pedophile! If he were alive today, I am sure he would have become a lowly degenerate!”

—If you’re worried about disgracing your family, why are you a black magician?

Akuto kept that thought to himself and chose to change the subject instead.

“Well, this Teruya Eiko bothers me. But I have problems with being forceful enough when it comes to girls...”

Fujiko stared at Akuto with resentment in her eyes.

“You were certainly forceful with me.”

“Yeah, but you’re evil. You can’t exactly expect me to show you kindness,” replied Akuto reflexively.

Fujiko held the incantation gun toward Akuto and spoke with her voice trembling.

"I hate those who oppose me and those who obey me are weak."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Akuto respectfully took the incantation gun she was holding out.

Part 5

Akuto tried firing the incantation gun in the forest behind the school building and it seemed to be working well. He had placed steel cans at a distance as targets and he quickly figured out how to accurately blow them to smithereens. He could control the path of the bullets and the timing of the explosion with nothing but his own will, so it was quite easy to use. And unlike when he used his own magic, the power was restrained to a set range. Akuto was relieved to finally have a weapon he could control.

And it seemed Hiroshi had finished packing the supplies. The boy showed up behind the school building with a giant knapsack on his back. Korone was with him.

"Aniki! Just to be sure, I prepared enough supplies to last us an entire week!"

"Thanks... But you should have split the supplies into two bags."

"I can't make you carry the supplies, aniki! Just leave it to me!"

"You can carry everything if you want, but I don't want you to attempt too much and waste all of your effort because of it."

"Don't worry! I always waste all of my effort!"

"Oh, I see... Fine then. Now, let's get going," said Akuto.

But Korone cut in to say, "But it is the evening. I thought we were leaving in the morning."

"Let's get an early start. I want to leave while no one is watching. We can't let ourselves be spotted."

A voice from above responded to Akuto's statement.

"Who can you not let spot you, Sai Akuto!?"

Akuto looked up in shock to find Teruya Eiko standing in a tree. She didn't seem to mind that he could see her panties. In fact, she was puffing her chest out in pride while spreading her legs so he could get a better look.

"What are you..."

Before he could finish his question, Akuto noticed the panties quickly approaching him. Eiko had jumped down. She twisted her body around in midair to nicely land on Akuto's shoulders like he was giving her a piggyback ride.

"You promised to bring me with you!" shouted Eiko with an excited look.

"I don't remember promising anything."

"I'm coming with you even if you didn't promise anything. Got it?"

Eiko began rubbing her hips up against the back of Akuto's head.

"Hey..." Akuto started, but it was Hiroshi who began protesting in earnest.

"Get away from aniki, you whore!"

"Don't use such filthy language! And I'm free to climb up on his shoulders if I want to!"

"No, you are not! Aniki is mine!"

"Are you gay? Even if you are, he certainly isn't. Just look how red his face is. Look, look."

Eiko continued to grind her hips up against the back of Akuto's head.

His ears were trapped between her soft thighs and he could definitely feel his cheeks turning red.

"G-get off of me."

As usual, Akuto was still unable to use force at times like this. In the same way, Hiroshi continued to protest but never once touched Eiko.

"Please take me with you. Of course, I'll follow you even if you refuse."

"Not a chance!" shouted Hiroshi.

"But it might be dangerous," argued Akuto.

"C'mon!"

After they all argued back and forth for a few minutes, Korone suddenly spoke up.

"Arguing will not resolve anything. And the sun has already set. How about we camp here for tonight?"

And so they did.

—Wait a second. Why are we camping in the forest behind the school?

By the time Akuto realized that, he was already lying in his tent. Eiko had disappeared at some point, but she was clearly watching them. When he tried to sneak out of his tent and escape from her in the night, she had suddenly appeared from behind a tree.

—So she's monitoring us. She isn't an artificial human, so has she been trained in how to stay awake all night? Honestly, who is she?

Akuto eventually gave up and went to sleep.

Akuto woke Hiroshi very early the next morning to begin their journey (and because he would have felt like a complete idiot if any other students saw them camping in the forest right out back), but Junko was returning to the academy at the same time. She came back after being summoned by her father.

Her father had told her that Teruya Eiko had infiltrated the school as an officially designated spy. He had no knowledge regarding her mission or who she was working for.

The Hattori and Teruya families had a long history. They both followed the Suhara religion, but they often came into conflict over differing interpretations of the religion's doctrines. The Hattori family had chosen to aid the peacetime government in national defense while the Teruya family saw that as weakness and viewed dedicating one's life to honing one's military might as a virtue.

—If one of them has infiltrated the school, their goal must be...

Junko naturally thought of Akuto. She had headed back to school even before the flying buses were running so that she could arrive at Akuto's dorm room window as quickly as possible. However, one glance was enough to tell her that Akuto was gone. The curtain was wide open and the bed was neatly made up.

"He's out? This early in the morning?"

Junko moved to the girls' dorm and knocked on Keena's door. She received no response, but Keena had not locked the door. She turned the knob and entered.

The room was filled with stuffed animals and empty bags of food and Keena was in a deep sleep.



"I feel bad for doing this so early in the morning."

Junko shook Keena as she spoke in her sleep.

"I can't eat anymore Koshihikari..."

"What?"

"But I can still eat more Milky Queen."

"Wake up Keena!"

Junko shook her harder and Keena finally sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Is it morning all ready?"

"It's early. I'm sorry, but the situation is urgent. Where's Akuto?"

"Hm? A-chan left."

"Left where?"

"To go treasure hunting."

"What? Is he that foolish?" she replied due to her ignorance of the events that had transpired during previous days.

"No. It's real. A pirate's treasure is hidden somewhere in the academy. Only a truly courageous adventurer can get it."

"Enough!! Tell me the truth!"

"I am telling the truth. It must be Captain Kidd's treasure. It has been 50 years since it was said his grand voyage ended at this academy, but it still hasn't been found"

"This has always been a landlocked area!" shouted Junko.

She decided it had been a mistake to ask Keena, so she headed off to find someone more trustworthy to ask. However, she did not get any actual information until breakfast.

"That idiot went off on that treasure hunt to take responsibility."

"Yeah, with that weird girl. Not Keena, but that girl with the long green hair. I'd never seen her before. Is she really a student here? Or is she a graduate?"

"Does it matter? Though, they seemed really close."

"Yeah, after what they did at the morning assembly... Ha ha ha! Oh, it's hard to just out and say it."

"C'mon, say it. They did that!"

"And at the morning assembly. I still can't believe it!"

The girls did not hold back in their conversation with no guys present, but what they said was just too much for Junko. She almost passed out.

—What are you thinking, Akuto!? And don't tell me it's Eiko that you're with.

Junko then acquired a copy of the treasure map, made her preparations, and ignored the head public moral officer's ban as she headed out to secretly pursue Akuto. By the time she did, it was well past noon.

Chapter 3: The Three Keys

Part 1

All students who went treasure hunting had gone to the same place because the only location immediately identifiable on the treasure map was the underground crypt.

"So the other two marked locations cover too large an area?"

"That's right. This one is in the forest and this one is in the old city," explained Hiroshi while Akuto compared the treasure map with an aerial image of the academy grounds on his student handbook.

"I guess this crypt is large enough to know that's what it's pointing to. I just hope we don't have to search through the other two areas."

Akuto pointed at the location of the crypt. A small park was prepared aboveground. The park had an entrance leading underground that people used when performing a ceremony to mourn for those lost during the war.

"There's also this text."

<For Yamato Bouichirou.>

It was written in small letters below the mark on the map. The other two marked locations had nothing written next to them, so this was clearly the first location to investigate.

"Is this Yamato Bouichirou one of the soldiers who died in the war?"

"The crypt is filled with graves that contain funerary urns. If we can find his grave, it might hold some kind of clue," said Hiroshi.

Eiko began roaring with laughter at that.

"That's a stupid idea. You could figure it out if you gave it a little thought."

"We can't know until we check!" shouted back Hiroshi.

The two of them had been like this the entire time. It was giving Akuto a headache.

"But what if Bouichirou isn't dead?"

"Now you're sounding stupid. If we can't find this guy's ashes, we just have to assume the hint means something else."

Eiko and Hiroshi's argument was showing no sign of ending, so Akuto pointed forward.

"Look, I can see the park."

They arrived at their first destination just before noon.

They passed through the gate. It did not seem the park was regularly cleaned. Grass covered the brick path in places and tree branches stretched across everywhere, giving the place a gloomy atmosphere. There was a rest area made up of a bench underneath a roof, but they hesitated to use it with how long it had been since it was cleaned.

"It looks like they only clean the area in preparation for the ceremony," said Hiroshi.

"The war was over 100 years ago, so I don't really blame them," replied Akuto.

This time, Hiroshi pointed forward. He had spotted a building that was a bit tidier even if it had not been cleaned in a while either. The words "War Memorial Building" were carved on the side and a glance in the window showed it was filled with paintings, military uniforms, and other objects from the time of the war. It seemed to be cleaned at least once a year.

"The entrance to the crypt is in there," said Hiroshi because he had taken part in the ceremony in the past.

He took the lead and opened the door to the memorial building. He turned right directly upon entering the display room and continued straight until he reached a large door.

"There's a staircase behind this door."

"Then there might be immediate danger on the other side. We must

take precaution.”

Akuto told Hiroshi to leave their supplies here and was about to tell Eiko to wait with them, but she grabbed onto his arm before he could.

“I’m going with you, obviously.”

This made it difficult for Akuto to argue with her.

“Fine, but at least stop clinging to me. There is a good chance that this place is dangerous.”

—I can’t simply let this girl put herself in harm's way, but it looks like I don't have much of a choice.

Still uneasy, Akuto stuck his hand in his pocket and grabbed the grip of his incantation gun. He used the other to open the door.

The staircase leading underground was wide enough for five or six people to walk side by side and it had lights installed at set intervals. It felt less like heading underground than the path to the underground labyrinth in the school. But they continued down a long time, so Akuto guessed the crypt had to be quite a ways underground.

At the bottom of the stairs was a vast space. It looked as large as a stadium. The ceiling was very high up. A five story building would probably have fit inside the room. Lights were installed on the ceiling, but they were not bright enough to fully light up the ground. The other end of the space was too dim to see well. The floor looked like an artificial

lawn. Small square boxes were systematically lined up to fill the space. That was all that occupied the area. As they walked across the grid-shaped artificial lawn running between the boxes, it became clear those boxes were plastic gravestones. Each of them was only 30 cm square, meaning many the dead had been put to rest here. Each gravestone had a name carved into it. They seemed to be organized in gojuuon order.

“There are a lot of them, but we should be able to find the name we want right here.”

With that comment, Akuto began to search for the family name “Yamato”. The vowel row was near the entrance, so the “Y” row would be near the opposite side.

“If confrontation truly is inevitable, I suppose it would be further down.”

Akuto began walking with Eiko and Hiroshi following behind. As they moved further in, they began to notice stains and scars on the floor that had not been visible from the entrance. Some conflict had clearly taken place here. A few scraps of bloody cloth had fallen to the floor in places.

“It's such a shame that this place was violated. Doesn't anyone respect the dead anymore?” muttered Akuto, but Eiko cried out in utter surprise.

“Ehhhh!? What do you mean? You're the demon king! Why are you talking about respect as if you care?”

“I am not and never will be the damned Demon King,” he replied immediately and Eiko shook her head.

"You can't possibly be this dull. Why do you insist on taking everything in the least interesting direction?"

"I don't like living only for the present like that."

Akuto also didn't like being criticized so coldly.

"If you insist on behaving this way, I will be forced to withdraw my love for you. I might just end up betraying you!"

Eiko hopped in front of Akuto, spun around, and stretched her mouth out as if sulking. The gesture was so childish yet so serious that Akuto was left bewildered.

—Betray me? But she was never even on my side in the first place. In fact, I get the feeling she's been manipulating me from the very beginning. What am I supposed to do about her?

"Why are you so concerned about what I do?" he asked.

Eiko suddenly grew angry and said, "Because I'm in love with you!"

"Now, wait just a second. We barely know each other."

This sudden and unexpected declaration of her so-called love was shocking in the very least.

"That's right! We first met during that morning assembly! What's your point? Haven't you ever heard of love at first sight!?"

"That may be, but you're going about it the wrong way"

"You can't be worried about whether something is right or wrong! Why do you insist on that?"

"Because I believe it's important to always work towards ensuring peace. This is wrong because it's inappropriate," said Akuto in full diligence mode.

This irritated Eiko even further and she began making a fuss like a child.

"You don't get it! I came here because I heard you were the Demon King! Why do you have to be such a goody two-shoes!?" cried Eiko, but Akuto did not respond.

He had spotted a shadow moving behind Eiko.

"Look out! Behind you!" warned Hiroshi as he pointed behind Eiko, but Eiko's excitement did not die down.

"Are you sure you don't want me on your side? I want to dedicate my life to a true man and I am saying that I've taken a liking to you!"

"We can discuss this later."

Akuto held up his incantation gun.

A human-shaped shadow was approaching from behind Eiko. Its slender form moved slowly. That was all he could tell.

"Don't move or I'll shoot," he warned.

The shadow immediately accelerated, so he fired the incantation gun.

A dry sound rang out as he fired it. He controlled the bullet to pursue the shadow as it attempted to evade. As soon as the bullet approached the shadow, it detonated at a level regulated to blow the creature away.

A ball of light the size of a basketball swelled out. Even if the pressure was only enough to knock a human back, the impact of a direct hit would have been too much to withstand.

But the shadow scattered in the center of the glowing orb. Once the ball disappeared, a definite hole could be seen right there. It was as if the ball had struck some soft object and pierced straight through it. However, that hole was quickly filled in. The shadow seemed to be made up of many small particles and Akuto got the feeling it could freely change its shape no matter what was sent against it.

—This is exactly what the other students were talking about. I had hoped I could scatter it with that blast.

Akuto loaded the next bullet as he tried to come up with a plan, but then Eiko cut between him and the shadow.

“Get the hell out of the way!”

Eiko quickly pulled a short sword from within her uniform. She held it backhandedly and spun around to slice horizontally.

Just like with the explosion, the shadow was sliced apart but regenerated as soon as it jumped back.

Akuto was more amazed by Eiko's actions than by the shadow's regeneration.

—She's clearly no ordinary human.

But even so, he could not allow her to remain on the front line. He hesitated over whether he should instruct her to fall back, but ultimately decided she wouldn't listen to him even if he did. Instead, he moved forward.

He could see the main body of the shadow. It was slender and wearing all black. He couldn't tell if it was male or female. Its face was covered by a white mask, but it looked human. As Akuto approached, it spoke.

“Leave and never return. If you do not heed my warning, I cannot guarantee your survival.”

"I'm glad that we can communicate. And I was actually just thinking the same thing."

Akuto truly meant what he said and the shadow's shoulders seemed to droop in disappointment upon stating his intentions.

"Then leave and never return to this-..."

The shadow trailed off as he was interrupted by a sudden shout.

"Kiiiaahhhh!"

Eiko jumped up and sliced her short sword down toward the top of the shadow's head.

Akuto thought the shadow's mask would be broken, but then even the mask transformed into fog. Was the mask part of the shadow's body, could it actually turn nearby objects into that fog as well, or was this nothing more than an illusion?

—Overthinking it isn't going to give me any answers. I have to stop her.

"Stop! Fall back!"

"No!"

Eiko ignored Akuto's instructions and continued to slash at the shadow.

This did not seem to have any effect, but the shadow fell back as if Eiko's slashes were hurting it. It may have been exhausting to turn its body into that fog.

—That means it isn't an illusion. Can it turn itself and any nearby objects into this fog and then reconstruct them? If so, this spell must be draining its mana.

Akuto decided that that was the only conclusion.

—And once the shadow tires itself out, it will be forced to rely on offence!

"I said fall back!" repeated Akuto, but unsurprisingly, Eiko did not do as he said.

"Why are you giving me orders!? I'll never follow the orders of someone I don't love!"

—What is with this girl!?

And then Akuto's fears came true.

The shadow extended an arm-like appendage which transformed into fog. In the next instant, it reformed in the shape of a sharp silver blade. The change had been so unexpected that Eiko was unable to react in time. She could not fully evade the stabbing strike from the newly formed blade.

“Kyaaaah!”

Eiko was knocked back and collapsed to the floor. It seemed she had managed to hold up her short sword and block the blow, but a line of red had appeared on her arm.

“I warned you and your companions, girl,” said the shadow in a low voice as it seemed to glide toward Eiko.

It continued its assault on Eiko with the blade.

Eiko rolled to the side and blocked with her short sword to somehow manage to survive.

—If it has to solidify in order to strike...!

Akuto repeatedly tried to fire a bullet at the exact instant the shadow attacked Eiko, but the shadow would either turn a portion of its body into fog to neutralize the bullet or it would quickly deflect it with the blade.

Akuto then chose another bullet and quickly loaded the gun. This bullet had magic that would cause a small tornado.

He fired the bullet as the shadow attempted to attack Eiko yet again. The shadow assumed the bullet would have the same effect as before, so it tried to avoid it by turning into a fog. However, the bullet caused a whirlwind that enveloped the fog making up the shadow’s body. Akuto

used his power to increase the intensity of the whirlwind. It instantly grew into a small tornado twice as tall and blew the shadow away.

—It isn't all that powerful, but it's pretty useful if you can control it.

Akuto ran over to Eiko.

"Are you okay?"

He held a hand out toward her where she lay collapsed on the ground, but he regretted it an instant later. Eiko looked up at him with a flush on her cheeks. Akuto recalled seeing a few girls looking at him this way back in his middle school days. And the situation had never turned out well.

—What am I supposed to do? I don't know why, but girls like her always get really angry or start crying when I try to explain the situation and fix the misunderstanding.

"You saved me!" shouted Eiko in excitement.

"I would have done the same thing for anyone in your position."

Akuto tried to draw back his extended hand, but Eiko grabbed onto it before he could.

"Don't be shy. You need to be more honest!"

Eiko seemed to be in a very good mood.

Akuto averted his gaze and called out to Korone who had been watching from behind the entire time.

"Hey, can you heal her?"

But Korone silently pointed behind Akuto.

"?"

He looked over and found the shadow reforming. Akuto could somehow tell that the shadow was angry. He could not tell if this was due to this enemy having human emotions or if he was simply reading human emotions where there were none.

—We're in trouble if it attacks us more actively.

Akuto loaded another tornado bullet, but the shadow didn't approach or withdraw. It merely stood at a distance and slowly spread its arms.

Akuto had a bad feeling that turned out to be justified.

He heard the sound of wings flapping coming from above.

He looked up to find what looked like a black cloud floating up near the ceiling.

The cloud was writhing around while producing the low rumbling noise of countless bird or insects wings.

"You have got to be kidding me," groaned Akuto.

He had once seen a flock of birds migrating. That flock had been in the hundreds. He didn't know if these were birds or insects, but this flock or swarm was just as large despite being in an enclosed underground area.

Akuto learned anew just what kind of monster the other students had almost died fighting. This flock or swarm was obviously being controlled by the shadow.

"Run!" Akuto shouted to Eiko.

But Eiko remained stubborn.

"No! My Akuto is not the kind of person who runs away!"

Eiko held up her short sword backhandedly. She intended to continue fighting the shadow.

—Why is she so obsessed?

Eiko seemed more stubborn than insane to Akuto. He had sensed that there was more to this incident than met the eye, but it seemed Eiko knew something he didn't. However, he didn't have the time to think it

over.

The dark cloud lowered from above. It was a swarm of bats. Those black and ominous animals cut across his field of vision again and again. The sounds of their screeching and wings flapping filled the entire chamber.

Akuto repeatedly fired his incantation gun, but no matter how much he controlled the trajectory and the explosion, he could only ever shoot down one or two at a time. And he was attacked from his blind spots all the while.

"Shit."

The scratches themselves were light. However, the number of scratches was ridiculous. His clothes were ripped and blood began seeping from his torn skin. If this continued for too long, mutilation was inevitable.

Eiko and Hiroshi were in the same situation. Eiko was accurately cutting down the bats that flew in front of her, but she couldn't keep up with their numbers. Meanwhile, Hiroshi could only curl up in a ball.

"Korone!" shouted Akuto.

"Yes? Please do not ask me to save you. This situation is obviously your own fault, so saving you would not align with my mission to observe whether you are becoming the Demon King and to distance you from unnecessary harm," calmly replied Korone.

She alone stood still in an area beyond where the bats were swarming.



"Yeah, whatever! Just take Hiroshi and get the hell out of here!"

"That I can do."

Korone began rummaging around in her bag. She pulled out shoes with small tires attached and put them on her feet after holding them up in the air for some reason. They were basically roller blades, but they seemed to be powered in some way. Korone accelerated at a tremendous rate while still crouched down. She arrived at Hiroshi's side in an instant, roughly grabbed at his collar, made a splendid 180 that left behind the smell of burning tires, and shot away in another instant. It all took only a

few seconds.

—I should probably acknowledge her skills there, so why don't I feel any desire to do so?

After ensuring Korone had escaped to safety, Akuto turned back toward the shadow. He was almost certain that it was controlling the bats. Each and every one of the bats was artificial. That was obvious enough from the corpses left behind when he shot them down. They moved based on a simple system, but it would have been difficult for someone to take control of them. It may have been appropriate to say the shadow had tamed them. And the shadow had likely created all of them as well. If this shadow was human, he or she had tremendous talent. This would not be an easily defeated opponent.

But Akuto understood that it wouldn't do any good if they ran away. He also felt it was intentionally avoiding any fatal blows. Even so, it was still mercilessly attacking Eiko who stubbornly refused to fall back. The situation was only escalating. As time passed, the number of small cuts and scrapes on Eiko continued to grow. It was possible she would eventually run out of strength.

"There's no other way. I really am hopeless," complained Akuto.

A bad habit of his was how he thought so calmly at times like this.

He had thought up a way of resolving the situation. The worst part was that he felt he might actually be able to do it.

In the end, he was forced to follow the pace Eiko had set. She was trying to accomplish something and was willing to risk her life to do so. He didn't know if it was based on her expectations for him or on the size of her objective, but he felt like he would have to find the treasure now.

Of course, it was still too dangerous to simply do what Eiko wanted. She was clearly plotting something. However, he would prefer to know why he was being used and then choose his own path than to be used without ever learning the reason.

Akuto shouted toward the shadow.

"Sorry, but I changed my mind! I've decided to find what it is you're protecting! I'll try not to harm you too seriously, so please don't hold it against me!"

The shadow looked surprised at that announcement and the concentration of bats around Akuto suddenly increased. However, Akuto remained calm.

—I can use this.

Akuto pulled out one of the wind-producing rounds he had used before. He used his fingers to break off the actual bullet on the tip of the cartridge. He activated the magical signal stored inside which created a small whirlwind in his hand.

—I could control the wind when I fired it. But my mana is so unstable that I can't control mana when it's anywhere near me. In that case...

Akuto prepared himself and then strengthened the whirlwind in his hand.

The noise of the wind grew so loud it sounded like an explosion. It was as if a typhoon had suddenly materialize. The violently whirling wind spread out around Akuto.

All of the bats were swallowed by the wind. The artificial lawn on the floor was ripped to shreds and thrown through the air. The plastic gravestones were blown to dust and the funerary urns within came out and scattered their ashes everywhere.

"Eeee!"

The shadow let out a human shriek.

The wind spread out in a bowl shape with Akuto in the center. Akuto could obviously not control it anymore and it rampaged through everything in the chamber. The wind roared as it swept across every nook and cranny of the room. Whether fog or not, the shadow was swallowed and blown about.

—That should be enough.

With that thought, Akuto tried to suppress the mana, but he quickly realized he had failed. Amid the roar of the wind, he heard a loud and odd cracking noise. He looked up to find cracks spreading through the ceiling. Before he could even react, the ceiling began to cave in.

A great roar and tremor shook the earth. Stones and the items stored in the memorial building fell down and were thrown about by the wind.

After a while longer, Akuto finally succeeded in suppressing the wind. However, the War Memorial Building had been utterly destroyed at that point. Akuto and Eiko, who had collapsed next to him, were unscathed due to being at the center of the wind, but they were surrounded by nothing but rubble lying in a spiral. The ceiling had completely disintegrated and the midday sky was crystal clear.

—I thought I could do it, but this isn't what I hoped.

Akuto regretted his actions, but it was too late now.

However, Eiko got up next to him and spoke, delighted.

"Wow! That was amazing! You really did it!"

"I'm not proud of what I've done. What's so damn enjoyable about destruction?" replied Akuto in displeasure.

"It's just fun. Do you really need a reason for it to be fun?"

A smile surfaced on Eiko's bloodied face and it seemed she did not care about her own injuries.

"Anyway, why did you lead me here in the first place?" asked Akuto in all

seriousness because this was no joking matter.

Eiko began to reply while still smiling, but Akuto's serious expression did not crumble. She ultimately dropped the smile before speaking.

"What do you mean?" she asked sulkily.

"I know that you're hiding something from me."

"Well, yeah. But I think this will all be for your benefit."

"That doesn't matter. You want me to go on this treasure hunt no matter what. Up until now, I thought it might be a joke, but you were willing to risk your life for this. What is this treasure?"

When Akuto asked that, Eiko fell silent and looked away.

But then Eiko curled up on the ground. It seemed her injuries were too much for her after all.

Akuto silently placed a hand on her. He attempted to heal her like that first year did in the dining hall before. He was only imitating someone else's actions, but he didn't lose control over his mana. Healing probably didn't fall under the category of magic he specialized in, but it still worked well enough.

Eiko looked surprised at the healing, but then she suddenly spoke to Akuto.

"Hey, if I tell you, will you like me?"

"Maybe if you decide to make some changes," he replied while monitoring the progress of the healing.

Eiko's face lit up.

"No worries there. I already am decent."

"No, you're not," he replied immediately.

Eiko's face clouded over and she said, "Then I just have to become decent from now on, right?"

"That's right," agreed Akuto.

After checking on her cuts one last time, he removed his hand from her. Eiko looked disappointed, but she began speaking indifferently about something very frightening while checking on her condition.

"The treasure is the property of the previous Demon King."

"What? Where did you hear that?"

Even Akuto was shocked to hear his response.

"I can't tell you. But I want you to become a man by acquiring it."

"Acquiring one of the Demon King's possessions wouldn't make me a man. That's ridiculous. Are you a black magician or something?"

"Please don't compare me to them. I don't think as formally as those people."

"Then why?"

"It's your destiny. That's what it all comes down to."

"My destiny?"

"Yes. Someone I have sworn loyalty to said so. Between you and he, one of you will be destroyed and the other will hold the fate of the world in your hands."

"I've had enough of your stupid jokes."

"This is no joke. He's never been wrong as far as I know. And he's a lot like you. That is why I fell in love with you."

"I understand. So to sum it up, someone somewhere might think something about me," said Akuto in annoyance.

Eiko snorted like a spoiled child.

"I'm being serious, you jerk."

"If you are being serious, why are you weighing two different people against each other? And if I really am destined to have this thing, why do you bother doing anything?"

Eiko's expression suddenly darkened.

"Guys that do not understand how a girl's heart works are just pathetic."

"I know. It seems that I have bad luck with girls."

Akuto began walking tiptoed along the piles of rubble in order to avoid this conversation. Nevertheless, Eiko followed and continued speaking.

"Hey, do you want me to tell you?"

"Don't bother. Now that I know the circumstances, you're nothing but a nuisance."

"Don't be mean."

As Eiko spoke sulkily, Akuto spotted something at his feet.

"Yamato Bouichirou..."

He found a plate engraved with that name. As soon as he said the name, he realized he shouldn't have, but it was too late. Eiko crouched down at his feet.

"It's in here, isn't!?"

Eiko had already opened the gravestone the plate was attached to.

It didn't contain a funerary urn. Instead, it contained an old character doll. It was small enough to fit in someone's palm.

"A doll?"

Eiko picked it up and it seemed to actually be a keychain in the shape of the character rather than a doll.

"There has to be a button on the back."

Eiko turned it round and pressed the button. The doll's back had a small speaker hole. A voice played from it.

<Go to the shelf in the back of the knight equipment lab... Once you gather all three, play this message...>

That much was understandable, but the recording was followed by something like high-pitched static. Eiko handed the keychain to Akuto.

"This is a recorder keychain for children, but what was that last noise?"

"Part of the language used to program artificial intelligences. Any intelligent magician can produce the noise with their voice."

That explanation had suddenly come from behind Akuto. He turned around to find Korone.

"Don't scare me like that."

"I found it difficult to escape when the ceiling suddenly collapsed. Was that your doing?"

"Well...uh... That was self defense," replied Akuto. He then began talking about the keychain to avoid further questions. "So someone recorded this and hid it here."

"That is obvious. I will accept that this was self defense, but the other students are sure to assume you were desecrating the remains of those who died in the war."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to agree with you."

—It's only a matter of time.

Akuto looked up into the sky with no clue of what to do next.

Part 2

Fujiko was watching the goings on in the crypt using the crystal ball in her lab. She was utterly dumbfounded at what she saw.

—That keychain!

The footage was looking down on Akuto and the others from above. Fujiko had embedded a tracking device in the incantation gun she had given Akuto. She had then sent out a Monitor, a small flying relay device that would follow that signal.

"I can't believe it... But he can't talk his way out of this one!"

Fujiko picked up the glass container holding her brother's head and showed him the footage in the crystal ball.

"You speak of me 'talking my way out of' this, but I really have no memory of it. However, I do know that keychain is mine. I would often leave messages using it. Mother said you liked it better when I used that instead of a video letter when I was away from the house for extended periods of time."

"Don't you dare lie to me! If you know that much, how can you have no memory of leaving that message? Are even your memories fabricated? I never missed you when you were away! I know that quite well now!"

Fujiko disheveled her hair as she shouted in confusion. Her brother

frowned, but only attempted to comfort her.

"Please don't be upset, Fujiko. This is my fault."

"How can you say that so lightly!?"

"Because as a spirit, I can only answer you honestly," he said.

"That's not what I mean! Can't you see how upset I am? If your past wasn't what I have always believed it was, then what I have always believed is-...!"

"Don't cry, Fujiko."

"But this means you were not a weak and pathetic coward who shamelessly abandoned his duty. If you set all this up, then..."

"Fujiko, I was weak and pathetic and I did shamelessly abandon my duty."

"That's enough! How can I know for certain who the real-..."

"Kyaaaah!"

Fujiko heard a scream and something crashing down behind her. She turned around in surprise to find Keena buried under books that had fallen from the shelf.

"Soga Keena!" shouted Fujiko.

"Eh heh heh heh..." laughed Keena.

"How did you get in here!? How long have you been watching me!?"

Keena jumped in fright when Fujiko raised her voice, but tears quickly filled her eyes and she kneeled before Fujiko with her hands clasped in supplication.

"I'm sorry! My rice ball fell down a hole and rolled away! I ended up here as I chased after it! I wasn't trying to intrude."

Fujiko scratched at her head in annoyance.

"Honestly... you're such a bad liar."

But then Fujiko spotted a dirty rice ball out of the corner of her eye. It was covered in so much dust it must have rolled down the stairs on the way here. After seeing it, Fujiko felt that being angered any further would make her look foolish.

"Fine. Come to think of it, you already knew about this place. Just leave as soon as possible. I'm very busy."

As Fujiko made a shooing motion, Keena quickly latched onto the crystal ball.

"Hey, It's A-chan! Hi, A-chan!"

"Stop that! Get away from there!"

"Hey, onee-sama!" said Keena as she suddenly looked up at Fujiko.

"Wh-what is it? And did you just call me onee-sama?"

"Please let me call you onee-sama! Oh, and it may be rude to bring it up now, but I've been wanting to apologize for the other day!"

Keena had an oddly serious look in her eyes and Fujiko was swallowed up by her pace.

"Huh?"

"I don't expect you to forgive me! But please at least leave A-chan out of this! You must still hold a grudge if you're watching him here."

"W-well, yes. Of course I do."

"Okay! You may not be able to forgive him either, but A-chan didn't mean any harm. Now how about we go help!?"

"Help him?"

Fujiko had not even considered that possibility.

“That’s right! Let’s go, onee-sama!” repeated Keena.

None of it made any sense, but it was enough to surprise Fujiko. She had surely wanted to go herself and having Keena beg her to do so made it easier.

“Fine. If you insist,” said Fujiko quietly.

Keena gave a clap of delight and said, “Yay! Then let’s make our preparations right away! We’ll need rice and outdoor cooking equipment! Wait for me by the confession tree in the forest out back! Now you might learn the truth about your brother!”

—Eh? Wait a second.

Fujiko tried to ask what Keena meant by that, but the girl had already left the room.

Part 3

"I already decided that I'm going. I'll return to the school and report to the student council."

Akuto was insistent. He spoke firmly to Eiko while he drank tea from a kettle on the portable stove. They had already pitched the tents for the night.

Eiko didn't seem to have given up, but when he went as far as to threaten her, she fell silent and sulked.

The area had grown dark and it was just about time to sleep. Akuto called Korone over and asked her to watch over Eiko the entire night before he crawled into his own tent. They had three one-person tents set up. One for Akuto, one for Hiroshi, and one for Korone and Eiko.

—I always have trouble with girls like her.

Sleep fell on him while he silently complained.

But when he woke up the following morning, he realized the camp site was oddly silent. He left his tent and found Hiroshi's tent gone.

—Don't tell me...!

He entered Eiko's tent and found Korone in a pose as if in an embrace. However, she was all alone and frozen in place. She looked like a surreal

sculpture.

“Dammit! She got away.”

Korone had clearly been deactivated. Eiko must have convinced Korone to embrace her and then pulled the artificial human’s switch.

To ensure Korone didn't fall over when she was activated, he embraced her, reached a hand into her skirt, and groped about for her tail.

—This is always so embarrassing.

While trying to touch her soft rear end as little as possible, he stretched his hand toward her waist and grabbed her round tail. He pulled it and light returned to her eyes with a slight humming noise.

“Now, hurry! Give me the special ningyou-yaki...huh? Where is Teruya Eiko?” said Korone in surprise despite showing no emotion.

“You were deactivated.”

“That is a problem. And I take it this means you did not use magic to switch places with her and play with my body.”

“That's not funny. Why would you even consider that?”

Akuto moved away from Korone.

"Then where is she?"

Korone looked around the tent. A letter had been left on top of a small knapsack. Akuto picked it up and found it was from Hiroshi.

<Aniki, I've realized you only said you would be returning as a test to those around you. We'll find the treasure on our own.>

Akuto held his head in his hands.

"That bitch! She tricked him."

"Such a fool," declared Korone.

This was no different from taking a hostage. Akuto opened the small knapsack to find enough food and water for him. He put the bag on his back, left the tent, and began folding it.

"Will you follow them?" asked Korone.

Akuto nodded, "I don't have a choice. The next destination is the knight equipment lab. Do you know where it is?"

"It is listed in some old records."

"Then let's go."

Akuto began walking. The others likely had a lead of several hours and their pace would likely be similar, so he and Korone would arrive exactly that much after them.

"There'll probably be someone else protecting the treasure."

"I know."

"It seems that girl really wants me to become the Demon King. She said that it was my destiny."

"She is forcing the hopes of those around you onto you."

"Please, enough with the jokes."

He had assumed it was a joke because Korone had spoken the same as always, but she denied it.

"No, this is not a joke. That is one type of hope people have."

"But I don't want to be the Demon King."

"This has nothing to do with what you want. That is merely a matter of yourself."

"Don't make it any more complicated than it already is. I want to bring

peace to the world and I think I'm currently doing well as far as I'm concerned."

"Many people believe that, but it does not always work out so well. That is what it is to be human. We artificial humans envy that of you."

"You envy the fact that things don't always work out the way we want?"

"Yes."

"Hmm..."

After that, the two of them walked silently for a long while. After they left the unmaintained mountain path, an abandoned city finally came into view. It had been left as is after it had been burned down in the war. Akuto had never seen an entire ruined city before, it was almost too eerie.

"Why did they just leave the city like this?"

"Because of a lack of budget. It is on the academy's grounds, so any repairs or demolitions would have to be paid for out of the school's budget."

"Oh. So it was just abandoned."

Akuto began walking along the city's central street. The war was most definitely the cause of this mass destruction, and he was relieved not to find any traces of the dead.

“Two military forces clashed here after the residents were evacuated,” explained Korone. “The Demon King’s troops targeted the city because of the knight’s laboratory, so the knights evacuated the residents and fought using the building we are headed to as their base.”

“I see,” replied Akuto just as he heard a rumbling noise and felt the earth tremble as if from an earthquake. “Looks like my hunch was right.”

Akuto placed his bag on the ground and began running. Korone followed and continued with her explanations.

“As you have likely guessed, that noise came from the direction of the knight equipment laboratory.”

“Yeah, I figure as much.”

He turned the corner and found himself on a major road. In the center of the plaza visible up ahead, he saw a five-story building that had half-crumbled. It was an old building made of the concrete that was considered very valuable in modern times. The roof over the entrance had collapsed and a large entrance hall could be seen beyond it. A monster stood there.

—You have got to be kidding me.

What Akuto saw was a metal giant. This humanoid figure was covered in gigantic armor, looked to be about thirty meters tall, and was moving. He saw light occasionally run across the surface of its body, but it was

only after hearing Eiko's cries that he realized these were caused by the giant being attacked.

"Kiaah!"

Her battle cry was accompanied by a metallic clang and sparks flying from the armor's surface. Eiko could be seen flitting across in front of the giant each time. She was jumping around it while attacking with her short sword.

—That isn't working at all.

Akuto couldn't help but be dumbfounded by this sight. He couldn't come up with any way of resolving the situation, but he had to save her nonetheless.

"What am I supposed to do against a monster like that?" he complained to no one in particular while holding up his incantation gun.

When he did, the giant suddenly stopped moving.

—Eh?

Akuto found it hard to believe the giant had heard him, but it had obviously noticed him. The giant turned around and began walking toward the collapsed entrance. The entrance was too small for its large body, so the giant walked out as if spreading the entrance with its shoulders. It continued walking while ignoring the concrete fragments falling on it and the cloud of dust spreading out.

Akuto was terrified of the giant causing the earth to shake with each step.

It was thirty meters tall and fully armored. The gauntlet on its right hand was unusually large and held an axe just as long as a human being.

—Oh my God! I can't stand up to that behemoth! But if I can at least stop it temporarily, the others can use the chance to escape!

Akuto fired his incantation gun. He was of course aiming for the gaps in the armor. The area behind the knees contained a space to allow the giant to move. The area behind the giant's face guard was too dark to see what was inside, but attacking the back of the knee would cause decent damage whether it was a human or machine inside.

He controlled the bullet to hit the giant directly in the back of the knee. But just before it hit, the giant twisted its knee around to stop the bullet on the front knee plate.

"!"

Akuto was shocked that a giant like that could move quickly and subtly enough to block the bullet at the last second like that.

—Is it even possible for something this huge to have such remarkable agility?

He also realized he had heard some kind of quiet muttering. It was going to be harder to bring down this giant's defenses than he thought.

"Kiaaahh!!" shouted Eiko once more.

She jumped from the building and slashed at the giant from behind. However, the giant didn't overlook this attack. Eiko had been targeting a gap in the armor, but the giant superbly altered where the attack landed.

The giant then swung its axe as if irritated. Eiko easily avoided it by jumping back. It seemed the giant couldn't exhibit the same subtlety in its attacks. It swung its axe toward Eiko again and again, but the girl jumped around and avoided every strike.

Eiko only focused on evasion and it seemed that she didn't even consider retreating. Akuto began thinking about the possibility of knocking her unconscious and carrying her away, but that idea quickly became meaningless.

Someone else dashed out from within the building.

It was Hiroshi. Akuto couldn't imagine what he was thinking, but Hiroshi held one of the electromagnetic batons modern knights often used. He was attempting to bludgeon the giant into submission.

"Ahhhhh!"

—Oh, come on. What the hell is he thinking?

While trying to figure out what to do, Akuto fired his gun repeatedly to draw the giant's attention.

Whether the giant found the bullets to be a nuisance or it didn't even consider Hiroshi a threat, it turned toward Akuto just as he planned.

But then the giant began walking toward him and quickly picked up speed. Akuto considered fleeing, but he couldn't run fast enough to escape from the speed that giant's huge legs gave it. Now it was Akuto who was cornered.

—Are you freaking kidding me!?

The giant approached before his eyes. Akuto panicked as he thought of a plan. The giant used an axe. Eiko had easily evaded it, but the axe was only slow when it came to aiming. That blade was too large to avoid just by moving aside slightly after the giant had started to swing it down with a great roar. When it came down to it, Akuto didn't have the speed necessary to avoid it.

—In that case...

Akuto loaded his incantation gun with the strongest explosion round he had. If he controlled the mana to draw out the most powerful explosion he could, he guessed he would be able to blow away the giant.

He held up the incantation gun. He didn't bother aiming. The giant would just move its armor in the way regardless.

Without slowing down from its run, the giant swung up its axe. This caused a violent slashing sound.

—!

Akuto pulled the trigger.

This round was meant to be used only in fights at school. However, Akuto filled it with atmospheric mana the instant it hit. The explosion spread out several dozen times larger than normal.

With a tremendous boom, a sphere of light swelled out on the giant's chest.

That light continued to expand and consumed the giant.

The shockwave spread out and a wave of vibration shook the entire abandoned city for an instant.

While contemplating the time he had blown up the classroom, Akuto had investigated the pressure of the explosion he had created. The answer had been 5-7 kilograms per square centimeter. Without some kind of defense, the pressure of the explosion was enough to nearly kill someone. Even if the explosion had scattered due to being in midair, taking that to the chest should have at least knocked the giant to the ground.

—What the hell!?

Akuto was left speechless.

When the orb of light disappeared, the giant stood there unscathed. The only change was the smoke floating up from the heated metal of its armor.

“This is so not good.”

Akuto panicked.

The giant had already swung its axe up once more.

He had lost his chance to escape.

The axe roared as it was swung down. Its trajectory was headed straight toward Akuto.

That roaring axe struck Akuto.

And when the steel struck flesh, the sound of blood gushing could be heard.

“Aniki!” shouted Hiroshi as he ran up behind the giant.

“Kyaah!” screamed Eiko as she looked up at the giant’s back.

But...

—Oh, I get it. So that's it. There are things I naturally specialize in and things I don't. I should have listened more closely to what senpai said.

Akuto had come to a new understanding of what that meant.

He had thrown the incantation gun to his feet. He had then stopped the human-sized axe with his bare hands. He held his palms together above his forehead with the blade caught between them.

—Dammit. I'm the rational type, so no one would think I specialize in brute force like this.

The muscles of Akuto's arms had swollen up so it was noticeable even through his clothes. He had pumped mana into his muscles. That had multiplied his strength several times over.

—And unlike with other magic, I can actually tell I have complete control over this power!

Akuto looked up.

The giant was obviously confused. It was violently swaying back and forth as it tried to either push or pull the axe. No matter how much stronger Akuto had become, his actual weight hadn't changed. In other words, the giant should have only needed the power to lift up his body

weight. However, Akuto had dug his feet into the ground and was using his now superhuman leg strength to grab hold of the earth between his feet.

“Please don't resist,” said Akuto as he twisted the axe.

The giant tried to twist the axe back, creating a comparison between their strength.

However, the competition ended quickly. The giant refused to let go of the axe, so the twisting of the weapon wrenched its arms around and caused its entire body to fall to the side.

This caused a giant tremor to run through the earth. Hiroshi and other things lying on the ground were sent up into the air for an instant.

Akuto took the axe away from the giant. He tossed it up into the air, let it rotate around, and caught it by the handle. He then easily swung it around.

The giant didn't speak, but it crawled away from Akuto, stood up, and walked away with its back to Akuto and the others. It seemed less that it was fleeing and more that it had graciously accepted its defeat.

—Why are the guardians of the treasure so different from each other?

It bothered Akuto, but his thoughts were cut off when Hiroshi ran over to his side.

"That was so awesome! I should've known you'd do something like this!"

Akuto tossed the axe aside and felt the need to lecture Hiroshi.

"This is not the time for acknowledgement. I thought I made it clear that I wanted you to get to safety."

Hiroshi didn't seem to understand gravity of the situation.

"Eh? I just thought I needed to grow stronger since I'm your first follower!"

—Why the hell is he upset?

Akuto felt this was unreasonable, but he decided not to say anything as it didn't seem Hiroshi was all that angry.

"Fine, but I don't really get the importance of being strong," he said with a shrug.

He then looked around for Eiko. She was looking at him with an even more excitedly than Hiroshi.

"You really came through!"

Akuto ignored Eiko as she ran over. He walked right past her and toward the laboratory.

"You're going to get me involved no matter what I do. In that case, I'll see this through to the end. But keep in mind that I won't forgive you for endangering my friend."

"Drop the act! You can't possibly be this good of a person!"

Eiko spoke ill of him in her anger.

—This is why I can't stand this crazy bitch.

He set foot inside the half-crumbled laboratory. He was slightly interested in what they had been studying here, but everything had been cleared out. He went around to each room off the main hall, but they were all empty. The only thing remaining was in the room farthest back.

—Come to think of it, the keychain only mentioned the shelf in the back.

The room had nothing but empty steel shelves for documents. He opened all of the drawers to the shelves, only to find a memo pad-sized plate. He picked it up to find it was an old electronic toy. It could display the photos taken with it and could be drawn on with the attached pen.

—Another toy?

Akuto was overcome by an odd sensation as he activated the plate. It displayed a cave entrance surrounded by trees.

Something had been written on the border of the photo of the cave.

<Check the shrine within. Once you have all three, use this plate to photograph your palm for authorization.>

Akuto put the plate in his pocket.

—Why do I have a bad feeling about this? I seriously doubt this is just a treasure hunt.

"I've found underground water!" announced Korone as she held up two bent metal rods she had taken from her bag. "I can measure the flow of the underground water now."

Korone held one of the rods in each hand and walked ahead of the others. The metal rods wavered back and forth, but they stuck to a specific direction after she had walked a certain distance. She insisted the device detected mana, but Akuto couldn't help but be skeptical.

"We've been wandering through the forest for a while now. Are you sure this is working?" asked Akuto worriedly, but Korone nodded.

"There are no complications. We only need to follow the flow of the underground water."

None of them had recognized the location in the photograph, but Hiroshi had speculated it was the limestone cave rumored to exist deep within the forest.

"Limestone caves can't form without underground water, so we'll find the cave if we follow the underground water in the marked location on the map until it reaches the surface," assured Hiroshi.

"Why are there rumors about this limestone cave?"

"They say it has a hot spring. Some of the people who enter the cave find the hot spring and others don't, so it's known as the phantom hot spring."

"Couldn't the people who found it show people where it was? Or is it just in too inconvenient a location to want to come back?"

"It must be. But there aren't any rumors of monsters. The forest might actually be more dangerous."

"You say there are no monsters, but there has to be a guardian."

"Aniki, what is it?"

"Think about it. It doesn't make sense for this cave to have had a guardian all this time."

"I see... Then did the guardian only appear when the map was found?"

Hiroshi looked troubled.

"Either way, the situation has escalated without my involvement, but the students will think of some reason to blame me."

As Akuto complained, Korone looked up and said, "Ah."

"What is it?"

"I have found it."

Korone pointed toward the exact scene shown in the photograph. It was a cave entrance buried in trees.

"I never thought you would actually find it," said Akuto without thinking.

Korone held the metal rods up in front of Akuto's face.

"These rods are highly trusted magical tools that are used even when laying pipes."

"Oh, I get it," replied Akuto as he put down his bag.

He called Hiroshi over and had him conjure up light for them. He then

looked over toward Eiko. Unsurprisingly, she obviously intended to go in with him. Akuto had given up on trying to stop her.

"Let's go."

He then took the lead as they walked into the limestone cave. The entrance was small enough that he had to crouch, but the ceiling rose up soon afterwards. The stone beneath his feet was damp and slippery. It was very humid and water seemed to be flowing within.

"That's an interesting sight," said Hiroshi in admiration.

He was illuminating a tunnel just large enough for a bus to pass through. The walls were glittering. Water running through the ceiling trailed down the walls. Pieces of rock that had fallen from the eroding ceiling had gathered below.

"Is this the only path?"

As they continued on, the path seemed to head down. They saw a dark hole up ahead that the light didn't reach. When they arrived, they found it led to a large cavern.

Hiroshi amplified the light so they could see the entire cavern. It was about the size of a school gym. Stalactites hung down from the ceiling like icicles and stalagmites both large and small rose up from the floor like anthills. Further in, they could see circular indentations in the rock. They were filled with water. This created a row of several small pools.

They walked around to the walls of the hall. They had several indentations, but no holes leading out. It seemed this hall was the end of the cave.

—Are we really at a dead end? We still haven't found the shrine. Wait a minute. These pools might be deeper than they look. They might lead further in.

Akuto walked up to the side of the pool furthest back and crouched down. As expected, the wall that had appeared to be a dead end had a hole in it leaving a space of several dozen centimeters above the water's surface. They could head further in by passing through the pool.

Akuto placed a hand in the pool. It was warm. Just as the rumors said, it was a hot spring.

"It looks like we have no choice but to swim," said Akuto, but Hiroshi was too frightened.

"I'm afraid to go in there."

"You're right. It's dangerous. Okay, you can wait here with Korone."

Akuto stripped down to his boxers and took the orb of light from Hiroshi. If he said anything unnecessary here, Hiroshi might obstinately insist on "getting stronger" again, so he entered the pool without saying anything more. The water was surprisingly shallow. He had to crouch down and crawl with only his head above water. The hole didn't go very far. After only a few meters, the ceiling opened up again and he found

himself in a different cavern.

It was much larger than the previous one and light came in through the ceiling. It seemed the ceiling here had completely eroded because he could see a portion of the forest through it.

A portion of the hot spring Akuto was soaking in was made of limestone, but it changed to rougher rock up ahead. Past that point, it looked more like the standard forest hot spring. Several different hot springs were divided by areas of rock. Animals likely soothed their injuries in it too.

—This place is really relaxing. But this is no time to be taking it easy.

With that thought, Akuto stood up to search for the shrine where the treasure was hidden, but then someone grabbed onto him from behind.

"Aah!"

However, Akuto hadn't let his guard down too much. It was only Eiko who assaulted him. While Eiko was apparently skilled at spying, it had more to do with Akuto not wanting to pay any attention to her.

Akuto felt her soft breasts pressed against his back. He had no shirt on, so he could feel skin sticking to skin on his back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

Akuto tried to run away, but she was holding onto him from behind.

"We're finally alone. How about we have some fun?"

Eiko had her arms firmly wrapped around Akuto's body. She gradually pulled Akuto into the water like a ghost dragging down a victim.

"Let go of me!"

"No. If I let go, you'll run away."

"Of course I will! You're freaking naked!"

"No one goes into a hot spring wearing their clothes."

"Did you strip down back in the other cavern to pursue me?"

"I'm quick, so the others didn't notice. I've been waiting for a chance like this," she said in a bewitching voice.

"A chance to do what? Kill me?"



"No! You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I love you? And that means it's only natural for me to pursue you so violently."

Eiko pressed her body up against Akuto, grabbed his hand from behind, and guided it toward her own body.

"Wh-what are you doing?" he asked nervously.

“Don’t make me spell it out for you,” said Eiko as she pressed his hand against her breast.

Akuto’s fingers stiffened and Eiko gradually brought his hand lower. His hand slid down to her stomach and then even lower..

Part 4

—I need to train more often.

Junko finally became keenly aware of that fact. She had tracked Akuto and his team from the underground crypt to the deserted city, but she lost their trail once they entered the forest.

—A top-level spy should be able to do this with ease. Was I so filled with impure thoughts that I rushed things?

The “impure thoughts” Junko mentioned were her imaginings concerning whether Akuto and the mysterious girl with him were doing anything indecent. She did fine while focusing on tracking them, but her mind would quickly wander. When those impure thoughts made their way to the surface, she would shout out despite being all alone. She would then look around to make sure no one heard her.

—Get a hold of yourself, Junko. If this girl really is Teruya Eiko, he might be in danger.

“But now I’ve lost track of them.”

Junko was wandering through the forest. Just as she thought about leaving altogether to pick up the trail from the beginning once more, she found a spring welling up within the forest. She stuck her finger in it to see if it was drinkable and found it was reasonably warm.

—Come to think of it, I haven't had a chance to bathe for three days now. Maybe I should take some time to relax.

She put down her things, examined her surroundings, and then stripped off her clothes. She folded them, placed them on her head, placed her sheathed sword on top like a lid, and tied it all on to her head using the cord on the scabbard known as the sageo. This was a habit of hers that allowed her to react if attacked when she bathed.

After once again checking that no one was watching, she stretched her naked body and stepped into the bath.

"Ahh" she sighed, flushed while rubbing against herself.

—I'm pretty durable thanks to my martial arts training. I wonder if he prefers squishier breasts like Keena's...

After thinking that, she frantically shook her head.

—No, no, no. What am I saying? Constant training is my family's duty to keep others from saying we have grown weak after choosing government over war!

"But..."

Junko brought her chin and mouth under the water and blew bubbles, but then she sensed someone's presence. She silently brought her mouth out of the water and searched for this presence while still crouched down.

She then heard someone yell in surprise followed by splashing.

—There are two of them.

Junko sneaked over toward the sounds. It was on the other side of a large boulder. She could hear someone's voice.

"We're finally alone. How about we have some fun?"

—Wha-!?

The tone to that voice suggested that this was sexual foreplay between a boy and a girl.

—Maybe I should just leave.

Junko prepared to leave as her face reddened for a reason other than the water, but her curiosity got better of her.

"Let go of me."

"No. If I let go, you'll run away."

"Of course I will. You're naked."

—I recognize that diligent but blunt voice!

Junko was shocked when she heard that familiar voice so clearly. She drew her sword and stuck it out beyond the boulder so she could use it as a mirror to watch on.

—!

Akuto was naked and a girl was embracing him from behind. Akuto struggled, but the girl rubbed her body against him more violently.

Junko was overwhelmed by the embarrassment, confusion, and anger. She reversed the wrist of the hand holding the drawn sword to raise the blade and jumped into the air in an instant.

“Yaaaaaaaahhh!”

Part 5

Akuto could have stopped Eiko if he tried, but he knew he had issues with restraint. If he wasn't careful, he would end up blasting Eiko across the cavern. But when he calmed, he realized he would be worse off if he put Eiko in an even worse mood.

—On the bright side, I might be able to draw out some useful information if I go along with this... then again, I'm not exactly experienced in seduction, so I'm not sure I would be able to keep my cool. And I certainly can't take it all the way.

Akuto ultimately refused to let Eiko lead his hand any further and left it pressed up against her belly. He had to find a way to prolong the conversation.

"Wait a second. You act as if you would choose between me and your current master."

"What's wrong with choosing both?"

"I don't think I would be comfortable with that."

"Try to have an open mind."

"I don't think so. You see, I'm interested in what kind of a person this other man is."

Akuto viewed this as an attempt to look good while going along with Eiko's pace, but she latched onto it.

"Oh, I understand where you're coming from there. He-..."

Eiko trailed off because of a voice coming from above.

"Yaaaaaaaahhh!"

Akuto looked up.

Junko was falling down from above while naked and with her clothes on top of her head. Her legs were spread wide as she held her sword up above her head.

"Wait! What are you doing!?" shouted Akuto without thinking.

His comment appeared to have finally reminded Junko of her nudity.

"H-hyaaaah!"

She skillfully folded her arms and legs to ball up in midair and then landed right next to Akuto and Eiko. With a loud splash, a pillar of water shot up. Akuto and Eiko moved away from each other to put some distance between them and Junko.

"H-Hattori-san... what are you doing here?" asked Akuto.

Junko stuck just her head and sword out from the wave she had created. Her face was flushed a brilliant red, but her tone was very sharp.

"Akuto, you can't trust her! She's an official spy!"

"Officially designated?"

Akuto looked over at Eiko. She stood tall without even trying to cover up. Akuto looked away and she laughed.

"That's right. You had your suspicions, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have guessed you were officially designated. That means you work for the government. So is some VIP from the government involved in all this?"

"That's right! He wants to know if you really are a man who will stand up to destiny. And he sent me to hasten the process. You're standing at a dangerous crossroad. If I don't do something about it, you might die the instant you acquire the treasure."

"Die?"

"Yes. You need the proper qualifications, but as far as I can see, you lack those at the moment."

"I refuse to take this test, so there's no point."

"Okay, I'll simplify it: choose me. If you love me, I will make a man of you," declared Eiko.

Junko then cut in, "Wait! I don't know what you're talking about, Teruya, but I do know that you're working for the Imperial Public Safety Committee! That's the supervising organization for the knights, but it's also a radical faction in favor of subjugating black magicians!"

This revelation only angered Eiko.

"I'm sick of being called a radical! If we allowed anyone to use magic freely, the entire empire would crumble! Why can't you understand that!?"

Junko angrily responded, "That's what we call being radical! The Teruya family always takes things to such extremes! You're in no position to talk after passing down nothing but assassination techniques!"

"The Hattori family has grown weak and forgotten how to fight after working for the Imperial Ministry!"

"Silence! If you were following the government's laws, you would only be observing Sai Akuto. Why are you interfering and trying to lead him to the demon king's possession!?"

"The Public Safety Committee follows the law! And my dear Akuto has come all this way of his own free will!"

"Then leave! Stay away from him!" shouted Junko.

Eiko then relaxed.

"Ohhh, so that's it. In that case..." Eiko once more pressed herself against Akuto. "So, who will it be my darling, me or her?"

"What?"

Akuto was unsure of what to say.

"We work only for our master. Junko may be loyal to you now, but if you accept me and reject her, she loses all right to complain no matter what we do."

Eiko brought her lips right up to Akuto's ear, but intentionally spoke loud enough for Junko to hear. Akuto felt that did not quite make sense, but it seemed that was how it worked with spies. One look at Junko was enough to tell him she at least accepted it as true. She bit her lip in frustration and stared at Akuto.

—I'm not entirely sure what the hell is going on, but I can't exactly choose Junko. She's so easy to anger and she would never accept me as her master.

Akuto was troubled, but Junko didn't wait for his answer. She cried out to focus herself and attacked Eiko.

"Enough! This is between the two of us!"

Junko jumped up from the water, but Eiko turned Akuto's head in her direction.

"No!"

Junko sank back down into the water.

When Akuto realized she couldn't come out of the water because she was bothered by him seeing her, he hesitantly spoke up.

"I-it's okay. I'm not looking, so go nuts."

"You liar! You were obviously looking at me! And what do you mean 'go nuts'!? Are you expecting some kind of show!?"

"Is this really the time!?"

"Why don't you just get out of here!?"

"Oh, you're right. Sorry. Wait! I can't move!" yelled Akuto when he noticed a certain fact.

However, both Junko and Eiko weren't listening.

"This is a perfect opportunity! We can deal with our years of

resentment!"

Eiko moved gracefully toward Junko. Junko tried to fight back, but she couldn't move at full speed while also covering herself. Her sword was knocked from her hand by Eiko in no time at all.

"Oh, crap!"

"Ah ha ha! It must be tough being so pure!" shouted Eiko as her body wavered.

Suddenly, two copies of Eiko appeared on either side of her. This was the same technique Junko excelled at.

"If you lose your shame, you won't be considered a lady anymore!"

Junko created copies of her own. Several Eikos and Junkos shouted at each other as they fought.

"I taught you that technique when we were young children!"

"I don't remember it that way! It's the standard technique of our village!"

"I did it because our master was angry with you!"

"He was only angry because you mixed poison in his food and made it

look like I did it!"

"Shut up, you virgin!"

"You shut up, you slut!"

It was nothing more than a pathetic, childish argument, but when it included several versions of both participants leaping around a hot spring, Akuto wasn't able to move. And even if Junko was doing a splendid job of hiding her important parts with her arms and legs, he still had trouble finding anywhere to look when these two naked girls were cutting across in front of him while fighting.

However, when Akuto claimed to not be able to move, he was concerned with something else.

A pair of eyes had been glaring his way for a while now. They weren't human. And they were looking down from within a tree. Akuto wasn't sure of whether the eyes were canine or feline, but they appeared to be wild.

They were the eyes of a giant wolf. It didn't appear to have been simply altered by exposure to mana. When Akuto tried to manipulate the mana within the beast, he felt a power resisting him.



—So this is what is protecting this place. It doesn't seem to have a human will like the others, though.

The other guardians had had distinct personalities, but this one was wild. And on top of that, Akuto did not know how this opponent would attack.

Junko and Eiko had not noticed it, so they continued to fight evenly. However, it did seem Junko was being pushed back slightly.

—What should I do?

Akuto kept an eye on the beast while glancing around the area. He spotted a small shrine below the beast. He had not noticed it before because it was buried in leaves.

—So it'll attack anyone who approaches that shrine.

As soon as Akuto realized that, one pair of Junkos and Eikos began to approach the shrine as they battled.

"Not good!"

Akuto ran forward. He had seen the beast begin to move out of the corner of his eye. He ran in between that Junko and Eiko.

"What are you doing!?"

"Out of the way!"

The two girls shouted, but they could not continue speaking for long. A beast twice the size of a human jumped down toward Akuto.

Akuto received the body blow and tossed the beast behind him. The beast seemed to have quite a bit of physical strength, but it was not enough to match Akuto. However, the beast spun around in midair and landed safely on a rock. It had not taken any damage.

"A wolf?" said Junko.

"This is dangerous, so get ba-..."

The beast did not even give Akuto the chance to finish speaking. Almost as soon as it landed, it leaped once more and aimed for Akuto's face with its claws.

"Oh."

Akuto somehow managed to avoid the attack, but the beast landed on another rock and immediately jumped back toward Akuto.

He was unable to avoid this strike. A piece of the skin on his shoulder was ripped away.

"Uuh...!"

Akuto held his shoulder and curled up, but the beast did not give him the chance to see how much damage had been done. It moved on to its next attack with the same tempo as before. It leaped a third time with its claws extended.

And then every single copy of Junko and Eiko attacked the beast from every direction.

"Yaaahhh!"

"Kiaaahhh!"

Copy after copy rained down on the beast from the left and right, but they all landed after losing sight of their target.

"?"

Puzzled looks appeared on several faces. And then they were all blown away. The beast stood right in front of Akuto.

The beast had slipped past every single copy's attack and then destroyed almost every single one of them in an instant. Junko and Eiko had used up most of their energy, so they sank down exhausted on either side of Akuto. Any damage to their copies was sent back to their bodies by sapping their energy. They were both utterly exhausted.

—We might seriously be in trouble this time.

In all seriousness, Akuto prepared for his death. The previous guardians had avoided any fatal attacks in order to simply drive them away, but this one was completely wild. It did not seem to hold back at all. If it had not been for that first attack, Akuto might have been able to summon up all of his power to punch the beast just as it struck him, but he could not manage that now that he had been injured.

The beast made another leap.

Junko and Eiko drew in close to him in fear.

Akuto covered his face. He reflexively threw his body over the two girls to protect them.

He clenched his teeth to endure the coming pain of the beast's claws tearing through his body.

But...

Nothing happened.

He only heard a splash from directly in front of him.

He cautiously opened his eyes to find the beast floating in the water. It seemed to be asleep.

—Well, it looks like we were saved.

Akuto slowly stood up while still hesitating to believe this was real. He then realized he held Junko in his arms. She was trembling and desperately clinging to him.

"Hey," he called out and she opened her eyes.

After looking back and forth between Akuto and the floating beast, her entire body relaxed.

"Th-thank goodness..."

As she relaxed, she leaned up against Akuto's body.

"H-hey, wait..."

Akuto panicked and Junko finally realized what she was doing. She let out a meaningless scream, jumped back, and sank into the hot spring.

"So that's it," said an irritated voice.

It was Eiko. She was standing up from where she had been curled up a bit away from Akuto's back.

"Actions taken in reflex don't lie! Junko! It looks like Sai Akuto has chosen you!" declared Eiko. Then an evil smile appeared on her face as her anger-filled voice continued. "In that case, you can die for all I care! I hope you find this relic and then die because of it!"

Eiko walked through the hot spring and toward the shrine. She stuck her hand into it, pulled something out, and tossed it toward Akuto.

Akuto reflexively caught it. It was a key that fit in his palm.

—A key?

He was confused, but Eiko wordlessly threw herself back into the hot spring. She swam through the water and began to return to the hall she and Akuto had come from.

—Dammit. What is going on?

Akuto complained silently before he finally began feeling the pain in his shoulder.

"Ow, ow, ow."

When he held his shoulder and curled up, Junko approached.

"Are you okay?"

"It's not going to kill me," replied Akuto as he looked away from Junko. "Sorry that this has gotten so weird."

Junko blushed at his apology and shook her head.

"I-I do not mind. If only I had realized she was coming here sooner... No, wait. I did not notice because I was holed up in my room and I was holed up in my room because you stripped me naked in the middle of class!"

Junko's tone changed to that of a cross-examining attorney as she spoke.

"Sorry. You're right," Akuto readily admitted. But then he replied with a question that suddenly came to him. "Do you have a long history with that girl?"

"As I am sure you could gather, we have always been rivals. She never thinks about anything but her feelings in the moment."

"I noticed that," agreed Akuto and Junko looked shocked.

"What happened between you two!? No, wait. I don't mean it like that..."

"Don't worry. She was only a nuisance."

"That is good. She is the type who will change the way she lives her life for a guy. And she is wrong down to the fundamental level of thinking she has to serve someone. So...um...that talk about you being my master was nothing but her delusion. Also, she said you chose me, but that is not what happened, right?"

Junko continued speaking while completely flustered.

Akuto thought for a moment before replying.

"Actually, if I had to choose, I would go with you. But..."

Junko did not hear anything he said beyond "but". She was in such a state of confusion that she shook her hands around, sending water splashing everywhere.

Also, Akuto was unable to continue speaking because he heard a foolish-sounding voice from above.

"A-chaaan! Junko-chaaan!"

It was Keena.

Akuto looked up to find Keena flying down from the sky. She was positioned as if lying face down but had her arms and legs dangling limply below her. Surprisingly, Fujiko was sitting sideways on her back.

"Why are you spending so long talking without wondering why that beast fell asleep!? And what were you going to do had I not come? Also, you lost that gun on your way here, didn't you? It was not easy finding you!"

Fujiko was toying with a medicine bottle in her hand. It seemed she had scattered some sort of drug from the air to put the animal to sleep.

"A-chan, you're injured!"

Keena floated down toward Akuto.

"I'm fine. I just need to get Korone to treat it and then I have to put on my clothes. Um, and so does Hattori-san."

"Y-you do not need to point that out!" shouted back Junko.

Chapter 4: The Student Council President's Rage

Part 1

After Akuto was healed, they all gathered in the forest without knowing what to do. No one understood the situation. According to Korone and Hiroshi, Eiko had returned, put on her clothes, and then left in anger. That left no one who knew the whole story. They were having trouble discussing the issue. Akuto insisted they should return to the academy while Fujiko insisted they should activate the keys here. The others were unsure who was right. Out of all of them, only Keena remained cheerful. She looked like she was having a picnic.

However, Fujiko seemed to be acting oddly to Akuto.

"So that's the current state of things."

As Akuto explained the situation, Fujiko was fidgeting restlessly and biting her nails. Once he finished his explanation, she spoke up.

"Can I see those keys?"

Akuto did not want her taking any unnecessary actions, but then he recalled a certain fact.

—Come to think of it, this is somehow related to her brother.

He did not have a particularly logical reason, but he did feel a bit sorry for Fujiko. And so he lined the three keys up in front of her.

The first was a keychain shaped like a person that could record audio.

The second was a memo pad-sized plate that could take photos and be drawn on.

The third was an object that looked exactly like a key to a door.

Fujiko placed them in her hand, brought them up to her face one at a time, and carefully scrutinized them.

She no longer had the look of the perfect high-class girl or the look of the evil queen. She looked like nothing more than a girl desperately trying to search her memory.

"Are these yours, senpai?" asked Akuto.

Fujiko did not reply, but the familiar way with which she held the keychain and plate gave a tacit affirmation.

"You said your brother was a horrible person, but what did he do?"

When he changed the question, Fujiko shook her head.

"I do not know. However, I feel as if I must learn the truth."

Saying that, Fujiko toyed with the third key that did not seem to be hers. When she twisted the head of the key, it made a clicking noise.

The key then emitted a roar followed by a light.

"This is-...!"

They all looked at the key.

It began drawing a magic circle about 5 meters across in the air around them.

"This is a teleportation magic circle," said Korone.

Keena looked puzzled and asked, "What does that mean?"

"Anyone within the circle who wishes for it shall be transported to a preset location. Space is twisted to open a hole that the target individual is dropped through. The target individual is not broken down and transmitted, so it is the safer variety of teleportation," explained Korone.

"Anyone who wishes for it? Then..."

Akuto began to speak his fear, but his fear came true in the next instant.

Fujiko disappeared. And she was still holding all three keys.

"W-wait! What happens if the keys disappear?" frantically asked Akuto.

“Do not worry. For safety purposes, the magic circle will not immediately disappear. It will disappear in about a minute and it can be used to travel until then.”

“Then do we need to decide whether to follow her within the next minute?”

“Yes. However, there will be no problem if we are inside the magic circle when it disappears. We will simply be left here.”

—I get it.

Akuto resolved himself. He looked at the others and saw only looks of people intent on sticking with this to the end. Once he mentally gave his intent to transport, his body suddenly seemed to grow lighter. In the next instant, he felt like he was falling. It seemed he really did fall. He felt like he had fallen atop stone pavement from a bit off the ground. He braced himself and found himself in an unfamiliar place.

He looked around. It was an underground area even larger than the crypt. He was only guessing that it was underground, but he saw no chance of that being wrong with how distant the ceiling was above him. The area was tall enough for an entire building to fit inside. It was large in the other two dimensions as well. He thought an entire city might fit inside.

And a gate was located just in front of where Akuto and the others had appeared.

—A palace?

Akuto was at a loss for words. The others seemed shocked into speechlessness as well. The splendid gates before them were ornamented with gold. Akuto and the others seemed to be standing next to a wall. That wall had a giant gate. Beyond the gate was a stone-paved path about 100 meters long with an altar at the end.

“There’s an altar there,” said Akuto before a figure appeared in front of the gate.

This figure stood imposingly in their way as if to keep them from passing through the gate. The figure was not all that tall but was oddly intimidating.

“Hi there, hi there,” said the figure while lifting up the brim of her hat slightly.

“The student council president...” they all said in surprise.

“This is the goal. It was a fun game, wasn’t it?”

The president smiled and the three officers appeared from behind her. One slender girl was dressed all in black, one tall girl removed her three-meter-tall armor, and one muscular girl looked sleepy and still had the arms and legs of a beast.

—These three... The thought had crossed my mind, but I never thought it would be true.

Akuto carefully observed the three officers.

There was no mistaking it. The three monsters protecting the treasures had definitely been them.

"A game?" said Junko in displeasure.

"Ah ha ha ha," laughed the president. "Yes. This was a piece of entertainment put on by the student council. It was a treasure hunting game. Did you enjoy it? The prize is...let's see. How about a kiss on the cheek from me?"

The president smiled at that, but she and Keena, who was shouting "Yay! A kiss, a kiss!", were the only two smiling. The three officers stared spitefully at Akuto. When she noticed this, the president turned toward the three of them.

"C'mon, I'm doing my best here! Smile! Smile! Get them excited!"

"Ah...ah ha ha ha ha!"

"Don don pafu pafu!"

"This is so much fun, gya! That's the president for you! She's a genius at hosting games, gya!"

The three officers forced themselves to laugh, but this excited only

Keena.

"There is no way that is what this is. Can you please explain what is going on?" asked Junko.

"Like I said: it's a game. I made sure that map was found, sent the three officers out to get in the way, and will award the first person to arrive here."

The president's smile disappeared.

"I refuse to believe that," insisted Junko, but Akuto tried to hold her back.

"No, this is fine. And it was a fun game, right?"

When Akuto agreed with her, the president's forced smile returned.

"Yes, yes. Right? It was fun, right? Ah ha ha ha ha."

"Ah ha ha ha."

Akuto laughed stiffly back.

But those laughs changed to dry sounds of shock. Fujiko, who had silently held the keys up to this point, suddenly began running.

"I must pass through here!" shouted Fujiko.

She pulled a medicine bottle out of her pocket and threw it to the ground where the student council president stood. Smoke shot up and robbed everyone of their vision in no time.

"Oh, no!" shouted the president in panic.

Fujiko leapt into the smoke. The three officers tried to stop her, but she slipped through the gate before they could.

The next thing they knew, Fujiko was running along the stone-paved path to the altar.

"Senpai!"

Akuto tried to pursue her, but the president's sharp voice stopped him.

"Stop! It's too dangerous!"

The unusual tone to her voice stopped Akuto. He turned to look at her.

"This is no game, is it?"

"You all already knew that. I do thank you for attempting to read the atmosphere, though. Anyway, this is obviously no game."

The president shook her head in resignation.

"Is that a possession of the old demon king up ahead?"

"Yes. This is the lowest level of the academy's underground labyrinth. The final battle was fought underground and this was the demon king's base."

"Why is it still here?"

"You will understand before long. But let me tell you one thing: do not pass through this gate."

The president stared at Akuto as she spoke. Her gaze was filled with an odd intensity.

However, Akuto was not about to fall back so easily.

"Why?" he asked while staring her right back in the eye.

Hiroshi and even Junko instinctually stepped away from the two of them.

"Because. No matter what happens now, do not move from that spot. You passing through that gate would not be good for anyone involved."

The president spoke in a quiet but grave voice.

Part 2

Fujiko had realized that the faint light coming from the key was pointing towards the altar. And she was certain this light would reveal her past. She believed this would solve all of the contradictions she had felt for so long.

She ran across the stone pavement. No one followed her. As she approached the altar, her pace slowed and she checked on the keychain and plate.

—I need to confirm my palm with the plate and play that voice with the keychain. This altar must have some magical system built in and that is the process to open it.

She searched the altar. It was made of metal and the size of a double bed, so it looked like a platform for human sacrifices. It had writing carved into it in a relief.

<The seal shall remain until one qualified to save all of mankind appears. The unqualified shall receive death.>

A keyhole was located to the side of that writing and Fujiko had a feeling the key she held would fit.

"I have to use this..."

She inserted the key. A low rumbling could be heard. She quickly

realized that the altar itself had activated.

The plate in her hand lit up. It was only a toy, but it had the ability to detect mana communications. After receiving the signal, it displayed <Scan your palm.> She took a photograph of her own palm and sent it back. A reply immediately came. <Orally input the encoded password.> She pressed the keychain's button. Her brother's voice played, followed by the vocalized password.

Hearing the nostalgic sound of her brother's voice brought tears to her eyes. Those tears fell to the altar just as the altar began to rise up.

<Password accepted. Restarting system.>

When Fujiko heard that voice play, she moved away from the altar.

As it rose, it opened up by unraveling like a box made of interwoven wood. A hole leading underground then opened. That hole spread until it covered the entire pedestal of the altar.

Finally, a silver cylinder rose up from the hole.

It was ten meters across and stopped when it was sticking up to a height of about five meters.

A crack then appeared across the side of the cylinder. The cylinder began to slowly open to the left and right.

"What is going to happen?" cut in Akuto.

Behind the student council president, a silver cylinder was rising up beyond the stone-paved path.

"Well, you have committed a crime that you must pay for," said the president while shaking her head regrettably.

"A crime?"

"You dug this up. We tried to stop you. You understand that, right?"

"I do. You did not want anyone to find this. I understand that now."

"What I wanted was to maintain the status quo. Or perhaps I should say to preserve it. At any rate, the government wanted to pretend this did not exist."

"Because it belonged to the demon king?"

"Yes. We of course work for the government. We are studying to one day become bureaucrats. And once you become the student council president, you are already working for the government. However, the government is not one solid entity. We are from the main faction that wishes to leave the relics of the demon king be. We do not know what would happen if we destroyed them and it could cause great destruction if it was learned how to use them. Not even the black magicians wish to touch these relics of the demon king. In most cases, it seems certain qualifications are needed to use them and we do not know what those

are. If you carelessly approach them, you will die."

The president explained all this indifferently, but her words made Akuto gasp.

"Die!?"

"Yes. Etou Fujiko-kun may be done for. However, letting this happen is the punishment you must face. I do not know how close the two of you were, but remember that this sacrifice is your fault."

"I was led here by Teruya Eiko..." said Akuto before falling silent in the most unsightly fashion.

However, the president did not overlook this.

"Pathetic. She was most likely working for the radicals in the government. They wish to purge all of the black magicians. They even wish to start a war to do so. This may have been part of their preparations toward that end. Or they may have known you did not possess the qualifications and were therefore luring you to your death. At any rate, I do not know what exactly those creepy people are plotting, but they will undoubtedly go farther than the main faction of the government."

"Understood. So you are asking me to stay here and watch?"

"Yes. Do not think of trying to save her. This relic of the demon king will do nothing more than kill the unqualified person. It will not leave that

territory," explained the president.

But that did not sit well with Akuto.

"How can you know that?"

"After the demon king lost the war 100 years ago, the black magicians sealed his possessions in various places. A few of those relics have since been found. Both the black magicians and the government have tried to activate them. A few skilled people found the means of activating them and they proved it at the cost of their lives. And this is the most recently discovered relic."

"Then her older brother was..."

"So it seems. We do not know the details either, but we simply want to let this relic rest in peace. You gave us the map and we located it here. In other words, we succeeded in the treasure hunt much more quickly than you did. When we asked the government whether we should dispose of it or not, they told us to preserve its current state. Thinking back, there may have been some deals and arguments between the main faction and radical faction at the time. But I will obey my orders regardless."

The president raised a finger and drew an imaginary line in front of the gate.

"I will show no mercy if you cross this line."

The silver cylinder began to open before Fujiko's eyes. White smoke flowed from within. It seemed to have been cooled inside.

When the cylinder fully opened and Fujiko could see inside, she spoke without thinking.

"This is...!"

A giant black beast was curled up within.

—A dragon!

Its black body was covered in scales of black steel. Its horn was a giant screw made of steel. It had a silver glowing saddle on its back. This was the legendary dragon the demon king was said to have ridden into battle.

It was curled up with its tail pressed against its head, but it stirred and began moving. It slipped out of the cylinder with speed unbefitting of its size. It was about 15 meters long. It spread its folded wings as if stretching. It seemed to hold command over a space larger than its physical size.

"So it has been 100 years since I fell asleep."



He spoke. His face looked like a dinosaur or lizard, but his voice held great intelligence. His gold eyes opened and stared at Fujiko.

"But I recall being awakened just once. It was an imperfect activation, however. I think it has been 10 years since then. However, I take no joy in being woken for no purpose."

The dragon was only speaking to himself, but it was more than enough to frighten Fujiko.

"Y-you are...the legendary..."

"Are they speaking of me in legends? Try not to make me feel old. I was created to serve mankind and approach all of them impartially, but I was given a personality. And I prioritize acting in accordance with my personality over following my duties."

The dragon's voice rumbled deeply.

"E-excuse me, but wh-what do you mean by that?" asked Fujiko in a trembling voice.

"That I am selfish."

The dragon stuck his head out toward Fujiko as if threatening her. Fujiko screamed and fell backwards. The dragon let out a laugh.

"It pains me to be feared like that. And there is no need to be afraid any longer. I assume you are the one who activated me and you are unqualified. The unqualified are unable to make full use of me. And if my power is used recklessly, I will cause harm to mankind," said the dragon.

"Wh-what do you mean now?" said Fujiko in a trembling voice.

"When an unqualified person activates me, I must respond by swiftly killing that person," replied the dragon calmly.

And then the dragon opened its mouth wide in Fujiko's direction.

Part 3

"President!" cried Akuto.

They had all heard what the dragon had said.

The student council president replied in a bitter voice.

"Do not make me repeat myself."

The atmosphere grew as heavy as lead. No one said a word until Keena spoke up.

"A-chan! You need to save senpai!"

"I know that...but..."

Akuto was frustrated at the fact that he could not run forward. It was not that he was being held back by fear, laziness, or malice. It was because he understood that abandoning her was the right decision from the government's standpoint.

—The world can't be shown that the demon kings' power is still this strong!

A part of him felt the same way. Also, he had come to the academy to work with the government. For that reason, he could only say the

president's decision was the right one.

"I have no choice but to go along with the right decision!" roared Akuto.

Keena then raised her voice to drown out his voice.

"A-chan, you idiot! You don't know how senpai felt about all this!"

As soon as Keena shouted that, Akuto felt an odd numbness spread through his body. He did not know what it was, but everyone except Keena had an odd look on their face. It seemed they were all feeling the same sensation.

—Eh?

He felt something suddenly flow into the back of his mind. It felt like dreaming while awake or having someone else's memories enter his mind.

He was running.

He was being pursued.

He was filled with intense impatience and fear.

This was someone's nightmare...no, their actual experience.

He hid a key at that hot spring shrine. He jotted down something on the toy plate and took a photograph of the cave entrance. He had promised to take a photograph with the plate and show it to his little sister. He had never imagined he would use it this way.

He altered the landscape of the forest to throw off his pursuers. This was high-level magic he had been granted by Muleet, the god of the nation's land. He had received the divine protection of Muleet more than anyone. It would be impossible to completely lose his pursuers, but it would buy him time.

He then entered the ruins of the knight equipment laboratory. He hid the plate on a shelf in the back. His reason for this was simple: he was being pursued by the knights. He hoped this would reveal their crimes.

He continued to run. This would reveal their crimes. When he reflected on that fact, he realized where he would hide the last key. He ran.

He had to let someone know about that man at all costs. He had to reveal the truth about the man who had lied to him.

The seal to the demon king's final fortress had been broken and he had been sent to survey the area despite being a student. That was when that man had spoken to him.

"Could you investigate how to break the seal on that dragon? You only need to investigate it. Just between the two of us, it seems the next

demon king has awoken. The government plans to reseal it after the survey is complete, but I would prefer to completely destroy it.”

Who would have thought that had been a lie!

He had known that he was the only one who could break the password on the most difficult of the demon king’s relics. If he only had to break the password and not the seal itself, he could manage. He had done some background research on that man. The man was not a black magician. He was one of the leaders of the Public Safety Committee. It was only natural to trust him.

But he eventually realized that the man was actually hatching a frightening plan.

He could hardly believe what that plan entailed.

He entered the crypt. After learning of that plan, he had done more research on the man. He had discovered something unbelievable: that man was thought to have died in the war. That was 90 years ago. Who was this man?

He opened the box and searched for ashes. Naturally, none were found.

Yamato Bouichirou.

He would use the grave with that name to hide the toy keychain with the recording of the password.

It saddened him that he was forced to overwrite the recording of Fujiko's voice. Now he would not be able to hear her voice just before he died.

But it was best to leave behind the method of removing the dragon's seal for the next person to come along.

He listened to Fujiko's voice one last time, etched it into the back of his mind, overwrote it with the password, and placed it in the box.

He then created the map.

<To the brave one who has found this map...>

If possible, he wanted a black magician to find the map. He could no longer trust anyone but them. That was an odd thing. He had held such a prejudice against them before, yet now it was the government he could not trust.

The only place in the academy he could think that a black magician would go was the Mental Training Room. He had thoroughly investigated them out of his prejudice, so he was the only non-black magician who knew they used that place to communicate.

He attached the map to the wall.

He then left a hint as to what crimes he was trying to bring to light. He

hid the map over the portion of the constitution that approved the establishment of the Imperial Public Safety Committee.

He doubted anyone else talented enough to break the dragon's seal would appear for several decades. No one in the government could break the seal other than by following the hints he had left behind. And if all went well, the password would fall into the hands of the black magicians who worked in secret. Even if that did not happen, the map would cause enough of a commotion that it would be seen by the government's main faction and normal people before his enemies. If that happened, it would be impossible for them to monopolize the dragon.

And with that complete, one task remained.

He had to erase his memories of the password itself and of hiding the map. He would soon be captured. Once he was, he would be killed and necromancy would be cast on him. He had to erase the records of his memories from his god Muleet while he was still alive.

He used his authority as an associate priest to summon his god. He erased the appropriate records of his memories. He was forced to erase most of his school life. This would likely be hard on his family after his death.

His job was now done.

That man stood before him. The man was unpleasantly beautiful. He gave a cheerful and refreshing impression, but he was different on the inside...or perhaps he was not. It may have been that cheerful and refreshing side that had led him to work so hard toward his objective.

"Really? You erased your memories!? That keeps us from acquiring that dragon! Well done! This will delay our work by quite a bit. But this just means I need to think of another method."

The man shrugged. It served him right.

But he could not stand up to that man.

He would soon be killed.

The man stretched out his hand.

There was pain.

And shortly thereafter, only darkness.

"What was that!?" said Akuto.

Everyone else had the same expression as him.

Korone calmly explained, "These were memories recorded by the dragon. That dragon is illegally logging and saving the memories of every imperial citizen."

"So is it the god of the black magicians!?" asked Akuto in shock.

"It seems that function alone has continued even as it slept. No one was able to use it in that time, but after one hundred years, it is usable once more."

Despite Korone's explanation, there was one thing Akuto still did not understand.

"Why were those memories sent to all of us?"

"I believe someone acted as an intermediary. I do not know who, though."



Akuto looked over at Keena. She only gave a blank look in return. It seemed she did not know either.

—It doesn't matter who it was. We have seen it now. That is all that matters.

Akuto smiled in Keena's direction.

When she noticed, she smiled back.

"Okay!"

The student council president easily picked up on that atmosphere.

"This means nothing. I will not hold back," she said before making shooing motions toward Hiroshi and Keena.

"Korone," instructed Akuto.

Korone put on those roller skates she seemed to have taken a liking to, dashed over, grabbed Hiroshi and Keena under each of her arms, and moved away.

"Hattori-san," called out Akuto.

Junko shook her head and said, "A Suhara follower does not retreat."

"You can't do this. There is no reason for you to force yourself. This is my responsibility for sticking my head where it didn't belong."

"No, I need to pay Teruya Eiko back for what she did. I also think you made the right decision. And...and..." Junko trailed off, blushed, and continued quietly. "And you chose me, so I will-..."

"Eh? What was that?" Akuto asked because he could not hear her.

"You idiot! What I mean is-..." shouted Junko.

However, Akuto was once more unable to hear what she said. Before she could finish, Akuto's entire body was knocked back by an impact.

—Wha-!?

He was slammed against the ground before he even knew what was happening.

The same happened to Junko. And she seemed to have taken more damage than him. She groaned and was unable to get up.

"What did-...?"

He looked up and tried to say "what did you do?", but another impact struck him from the side.

However, Akuto managed to see what had hit him this time.

The student council president's arm had grown. She may have momentarily created more of the tissue forming her arm or it may have been a strike created solely out of mana like Junko's copies. Either way, the president had punched Akuto from the side while standing still ten meters away.

"The gong rings the instant you decide to fight," declared the president. And then she made a disinterested addition. "I saw those memories the same as you did. I understand how you feel. But I cannot allow you to pass for the sake of what I believe in."

"Then..." Akuto stood up. "Enough surprise attacks. Let's have an enjoyable fight."

"It seems you like fighting even more than your appearance lets on. Then let us have an enjoyable fight. It's been awhile since we met, but I have yet to introduce myself, have I? My name is Lily Shiraishi. I have a bit of a short temper."

Lily stretched out her right arm once more. Akuto twisted his body in an attempt to dodge it. And then a strike came from the opposite direction. Akuto was hit directly on the jaw. Lily had stretched her left arm out from below.

"At least expect a feint. You must not be as used to fighting as you let on."

Akuto shook his head to clear his muddled mind.

"Your judgment was wrong, president. I hate fighting."

"Come to think of it, these three mentioned that. They said you hesitated a lot despite your ridiculous strength."

Lily used her chin to point at the three.

"Is that so? Well, they were quite kind. They avoided making any fatal injuries. That is, except for the last one."

“When she transforms, she grows truly wild. Now, enough chatting. I am known to be quite kind as well. I would like to knock you out as quickly as possible.”

As Lily said that, she pointed behind her.

The dragon fired something from his open maw. The legends said dragons breathed fire, but this dragon released a metal rod carved into a screw.

This meter-long metal rod stabbed into the ground with a great roar. The stone pavement was torn apart between Fujiko’s legs where she still lay collapsed. It then rotated as it dug down into the ground.

“I created that within myself, so it is a portion of my body. Projectiles are cowardly, so one should wear down one’s own body. That is how the previous demon king thought. Now, girl. Stand and face me. I provide even the unqualified with a chance to fight. The previous demon king told me to prioritize my feelings over my duties and so I shall,” said the dragon.

Fujiko stood on trembling legs.

However, those memories she had seen were still lurking in the back of her mind.

—Brother...

She had learned the truth. The feelings she had held for ten years had all been based on lies. This made her feel that everything about her was meaningless.

"So you have stood. But you can do nothing with such shaky footing," declared the dragon coldly.

"There you have it." Lily shrugged at the dragon's words. "It would be best if you were unconscious. You don't want to see a drill tearing into a girl's body, do you? Once it kills Etou-kun, the dragon will go back to sleep. If we then destroy the recorded password, everything will be over. It will all come to an end while you sleep."

"I'm standing up to you because I can't accept that."

Akuto stared directly at Lily.

"Then what will you do? Overcome me and fight that dragon?" she said mockingly. "Doing that would be the same as choosing to be a demon king."

She was right about that, so Akuto was at a loss for words.

"I-I just need to do it in a way that doesn't make me a demon king."

Lily burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha! Excellent! I certainly can’t let someone pass if they aren’t even prepared to do what must be done!”

—I-it may be true that I am not prepared....

Akuto realized that his feelings were wavering. He had a bad habit of trying to look good, so he had a feeling he had come this far on nothing but momentum.

However...

“Do not worry! Do not worry about that, Sai Akuto!”

He heard a voice.

Junko had stood up.

Akuto looked up.

Junko raised her voice as she spoke to both Lily and Akuto.

“You may not be prepared, but I am! If you become a demon king, I will kill you!”

Those words brought clarity to Akuto’s mind. He stood up as well.

"Honestly... If you say that, I have no choice but to get up." Akuto looked over at Junko. "I know how problematic my personality can be."

Junko blushed as he looked at her.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I want everything to go well both in the present and the future. It makes me indecisive and I lack resolve. But if you will kill me, then maybe I can accept what might happen."

Akuto smiled.

Junko looked away and said, "Y-you are pathetic."

"There you have it, president."

Akuto turned back toward Lily. Her expression was one of admiration.

"You're quite the lady-killer. You would make a great ruler."

"Eh? I've never thought about it that way."

"I see. So you don't even realize it."

With that comment, Lily's arms grew once more. However, they stretched toward Junko instead of Akuto.

"Kh!"

Junko somehow managed to stop the punch with her sword, but the punches continued on and on. She was ultimately unable to withstand it all and was blown away.

"Hattori-san!" shouted Akuto.

Junko groaned after being knocked to the ground again.

"Uuh... I'm fine, so..."

"Understood."

He understood Junko's resolve painfully well, so he turned to face Lily.

"Here I come."

Akuto recalled the amplified tornado he had used in the crypt. If he could remember that wind spell, he could reproduce it without the bullet. He recalled the spell pulse that bullet had caused. He moved his fingers such that it drew out the same signals in his brain and used language to follow through with those signals.

"Transform this stirring in my heart to wind!"

A whirlwind appeared in Akuto's hand and instantly expanded into a tornado that approached Lily. This roaring tornado was several dozen meters tall, but Lily received it with an unconcerned expression.

"This is nothing but mana wind. The flow of mana can be stopped with more mana. That is a lesson you need to learn."

Lily created wind in her hand as well. This wind also instantly grew into a tornado. When it collided with Akuto's tornado, the two winds disappeared as if they had never existed.

"Remote mana attacks are easily eliminated by controlling mana. The way you once broke your enemies' arms and legs with mana pressure would be impossible without a great difference in power. One's power weakens considerably at a distance," explained Lily.

"Thanks for the lesson. I'll take that to mean a direct fistfight is the best plan. That brings it down to a simple matter of how much internal mana we have. With your small body, you should be at a disadvantage," said Akuto.

He had meant it as a casual comment, but the three officers watching on all stiffened as if they had been struck.

—?

Lily began acting oddly. She lowered her head and began trembling while her hand slowly crawled along the brim of her stylish hat.

The three officers all began panicking.

"Not good, gya!"

"Nothing good comes of the president touching her hat!"

"Gaahh!"

Lily's entire body was trembling.

"My small body?"

When Lily raised her head once more, her expression was overflowing with anger. She grabbed the brim of her hat and pulled it to the side to reverse the hat's direction.

"Ahh! She finally reversed her hat!"

"She can't be stopped once she does that, gya!"

The three officers all clung to each other and trembled in fear.

"Diiiiieee!" roared Lily.

Both of her arms disappeared from her body.

—Ah!

Akuto was shocked. No, he did not even have time to be shocked. Fists rained down on his body from every direction.

"Waaah!"

While being pummeled from every direction, Akuto saw that every direction around him for several dozen meters was filled with fists.

The torrent of blows tossed Akuto's body into the air and refused to let him fall. The fists dancing around in the air looked like a sphere several dozen meters across. And Akuto was at the center floating around like a feather in the wind.

After seeing that Akuto was no longer moving, Lily finally brought an end to the fists. The look in her eyes had finally returned to normal.

"So you are finally unconscious."

After seeing Akuto fall to the ground, Lily returned her hat to normal and checked behind her.

Fujiko seemed to be somehow avoiding the dragon's attacks. However, she specialized in making medicines, so she could not handle close quarters combat. She had been backed up against a corner.

"Poor thing. But I will make sure to take revenge for you," muttered Lily

too quietly for Fujiko to hear.

But then...

"This isn't over yet," rang out Akuto's voice.

Lily turned around in shock.

Akuto was covered in bruises, but he stood up. He moved forward on unsteady legs.

"You want more!?"

Lily sent out intense punches with both arms. She had not lost her cool this time, but she still sent blows accurately at Akuto's vitals with the same force as before.

However, Akuto did not stop walking forward.

"Ha ha. You really are kind, president. You went out of your way to teach me how to fight. I get it now. If you know it's coming, it doesn't hurt! That's the trick," muttered Akuto.

"Ah ha ha... So you've caught on!"

Lily laughed out of bravado but was actually half filled with fear. The student council president was known as the strongest in the school. Her

fists had once destroyed an entire group of knights that had called her short. Yet Akuto continued forward despite receiving those fists.

"You three!" shouted Lily to the three officers.

"Right!"

The three officers straightened up and immediately prepared for battle. One hardened her clothes into a silver color, one put on armor, and one transformed into a beast.

"Don't hold back! Get him!"

The three officers displayed a perfectly coordinated formation. They attacked Akuto from three different directions simultaneously. A silver blade came from above, a beast's fangs came from the right, and an axe as tall as he was came from the left. Each of these attacks had troubled him before and now he had no way of avoiding them.

However...

Akuto did not stop moving forward.

He caught the silver blade with his teeth, he grabbed the beast's claws with his right hand, and he grabbed the axe with his left hand despite the blade digging into his fingers. And he continued forward while dragging the three officers along with him.

Lily continued the rain of blows, but Akuto did not stop.

Finally, Akuto arrived right in front of Lily. He shook his body to throw off the three officers with surprising strength. They flew about ten meters through the air.

"Waaah!"

"Gnyaaah!"

"Ohhh!"

The three of them let out different screams as they crashed into the floor. They slid across the floor while producing a tremendous racket.

Lily stopped her fists. While sweat poured from her brow, she looked up at Akuto.

"This is no joke. Why do you need to go this far?"

"I just have a feeling. I thought up a way of resolving all of this nicely, so I want to try it out. I haven't given much thought to the repercussions, but I just have a feeling it will work."

Akuto looked down at Lily with his battered face.

Lily shrugged.

"Are you stupid? If you're willing to put in this much effort for a reason like that, I don't even care anymore. I was going to show you my best attack, but never mind. You'll either be killed by the dragon or Hattori, but this will kill you either way."

When Akuto realized what she meant, he gasped.

"Then..."

"Shut up. I didn't lose. I just can't be bothered to continue fighting."

Lily pointed behind her.

"Thank you," said Akuto with a bow.

"You should be thanking Hattori. This is based on my trust in what she says. I am still convinced what you are doing here is wrong."

Lily used her chin to point toward Junko. Akuto turned around to find Junko finally standing back up. She held her bruised cheek in embarrassment and waved her hand to urge Akuto on.

"I will bring this all to a happy ending. Do you really think I'm wrong?" Akuto asked Lily.

Lily lifted one corner of her mouth and replied, "It's because you're wrong that we call you a demon king."

Akuto tried to pass by Lily, but she called out to him as if she had suddenly remembered something.

"Wait a second."

"?"

Akuto stopped and Lily instructed him to crouch down.

He did not understand but did so regardless. Lily stretched up.

"I forgot to give you your promised reward."

Lily then kissed Akuto on the cheek.

Part 4

Fujiko trembled in fear as a metal rod crashed into the wall like a stake next to her face.

She no longer had any means of resisting. She had used up all of the medicines she had on her. Not to mention that she was not sure those medicines worked on dragons.

Even while driven up against that wall, Fujiko continued to think about her brother.

For quite a long time, she had viewed her brother as dishonest. However, it turned out her brother had been honest and strong. Her childhood image of him had been accurate. But it was too late to regret it. Even so, she could not help but feel frustrated that she had taken such an odd direction for her life. She had always wanted to love her brother and she regretted suppressing those feelings. The effort she had put into creating her outward face had been for nothing and the cowardly means she had used to create her secret face had been nothing but a meaningless bluff put on by someone without the talent of her brother.

—But I will be set free from all of this when I die. According to the common religious beliefs, I suppose I will be going to join my brother.

Fujiko seemed to lose her mind with that thought and a smile appeared on her lips.

And as she smiled, the dragon opened his maw wide. A metallic smell

flowed out from deep within his throat. Fujiko felt sick to the stomach.

And then...

"It's okay now, senpai. I will handle this."

She heard Akuto's voice.

Fujiko turned toward it.

His tall form had passed the gate. He stood directly behind the dragon. Despite clearly being so battered he could barely stand, he was puffing his chest out proudly.

The dragon turned his head to look as well.

"Most humans who act so tough are actually very shallow. Having the unqualified act as if they are qualified only irritates me."



As the dragon spoke coolly, he opened his mouth toward Akuto and fired a metal rod carved with a spiral at tremendous speed.

It was about a meter long and it caused a tremendous roar as it rotated.

However, Akuto did not evade it.

"Ryaaah!" he shouted as he mustered up every last bit of strength.

He swung his right fist toward the rotating metal rod.

As it rotated and flew through the air, the metal rod crashed into his fist.

The painful sound of metal scraping against metal reverberated throughout the area.

"What!?" cried the dragon in surprise.

Akuto's fist stopped the metal rod in midair. It did not stop rotating, but its tip did not drill a hole in Akuto's fist. Sparks flew from the fist and the rotating tip of the metal rod and the metal rod finally let out a great noise as it rotated. With a dry sound, the metal rod fell to the ground.

"I don't really know how to fight, so this is the only method I know."

Akuto shook his right hand as if it hurt.

The dragon spoke up in an interested voice.

"I do not know if you are qualified or not, but it has been 100 years since I met someone like you!"

"That's just because you've been sleeping for the last 100 years. You're overselling this."

Without waiting for Akuto to finish speaking, the dragon swung his tail to the side. His tail was as thick as a log, but Akuto stopped it with his

fist.

Sparks flew from between the dragon's scales and Akuto's fist. The dragon pushed his tail down to knock Akuto the ground.

Nevertheless, Akuto held his ground and pushed back the dragon's tail. While covered in sweat and breathing heavily, he swung his hand once more.

"What are you doing?" asked the dragon in puzzlement.

"Thinking about how to end this so I don't have to kill you and you don't kill me or senpai. I think an old-fashioned brawl would be best. Even if we are different sizes."

Akuto seemed to be completely serious, so the dragon let out a laugh.

"Ha ha ha ha! No one has ever said that to me before! Fine. Let us have a wonderful brawl!"

The dragon and Akuto stood facing each other and sent metal rod against fist and tail against fist. They both managed to count up to 20 blows, but they were too tired to continue counting beyond that.

And...

The dragon may have decided this would be the final blow because he swung his head toward Akuto. As that head approached with a roar,

Akuto sent out his fist.

The sound of metal clashing and then breaking rang out.

Once that noise died out, the human and dragon slowly collapsed to the ground simultaneously.

As Fujiko watched this unfold before her, she could not comprehend what had happened. Even so, she knew what she had to do.

Fujiko ran over to Akuto.

"What is your name?" asked the dragon from where it lay next to Akuto.

As he lay face-down on the ground, Akuto was sick of it all but felt he had to answer.

"Sai Akuto."

"What a horrible name."

"They gave it to me at the orphanage. Leave me alone. What about you?"

"Peterhausen."

"What a horrible name."

"My dead master gave it to me. He had a terrible naming sense, but I quite like it."

"Sounds like you had a good relationship with your master."

"He was an excellent man. And I hope that relationship can continue."

"Isn't he dead?"

"With my new master."

"Oh, that's nice. Congratulations."

"You are a fool, Sai Akuto. I mean you."

—What?

Akuto instinctually sat up.

"What do you mean?"

"Once I awaken, I require a master. Otherwise I will kill everyone who awakens me."

"But don't I need to be qualified?"

"Defeating me is part of that."

"No, wait a second! I refuse! I don't want this!"

"Are you sure? If you refuse, I must return to killing the people around me."

"No, wait! So what responsibilities do I have to take on if I become your master?"

"Nothing. However, my master is generally referred to as the demon king."

—Oh, no... I didn't think about the consequences again...

Akuto held his head in his hands.

And suddenly Fujiko ran over and embraced him.

"Wah! What are you doing, senpai?"

"Please stop calling me that!"

Fujiko looked at him with teary eyes.

—This is not good. Did her personality change due to the shock of what she saw?

"No, senpai. Calm down..."

"I told you to stop calling me that! Oh, my demon king! I will serve you for the rest of my life as a black magician!"

Fujiko pushed Akuto down to the ground.

"W-wait!"

—This is going to make my dream even harder to achieve... I wanted to be a top class national...what was it again?

Chapter 5: The Cheerful Conspirator

"I'm not sure what to think of this," complained Akuto.

Peterhausen insisted Akuto should live here if he was the dragon's master.

He was sitting within a room of the underground palace. The room was made to look exactly like a king's audience chamber from a picture book. It was covered in red carpet and contained an incredibly tall chair. Akuto was sitting in that chair, but it seemed to make his butt itch.

"Also, from an outsider's perspective..."

"From an outsider's perspective?" asked Peterhausen in puzzlement.

"From an outsider's perspective, I think I would look like a complete villain," continued Akuto.

The tall chair was decorated with skulls. Akuto sat in it with his legs crossed. Someone was sitting on the armrest facing outwards while nestling up against Akuto. It was Fujiko who had sworn allegiance to Akuto after truly awakening as a black magician. Keena was sitting on Akuto's lap and enjoying herself. Junko was standing next to the chair with a displeased look and her hand on her sword. The scene was rounded out by Peterhausen the 15 meter dragon curled up behind the chair and Hiroshi and Korone waiting at the bottom of the stairs leading to the chair.

"Looking like that, I can only assume you're trying to conquer the world. Maybe I should snap a photo and put it in the school newspaper," said Lily half in shock and half teasingly from where she was watching a bit away.

The three officers agreed with her suggestion.

"Please give me a break! I'm going to return to my dorm room! I want to have a normal school life!" cried Akuto.

"You really don't know when to give up, do you?" said Lily with a shrug.

In one area of the imperial capital was a certain building. A man was within an office there. He was breathtakingly beautiful, but had an odd lack of disagreeableness. Instead, he gave off a refreshing impression that led anyone to believe they could speak openly with him.

The man, Yamato Bouichirou, looked out upon the Japanese-style garden outside the window. He seemed to be contemplating something and it also appeared he had such a deep understanding of that garden that he could view it for hours on end without growing tired of it.

And then a figure rudely set foot in the garden. Bouichirou's expression clouded over, but the girl who had so roughly entered the garden showed no sign of noticing. She opened the window, climbed into the room, and simply poured her feelings onto Bouichirou.

"Hey! You need to torment Sai Akuto and Hattori Junko!" shouted Eiko

as she threw herself into Bouichirou's arms while he remained seated.

"Tormenting someone is not a gentle way of doing things."

"But they're completely insane! They need to die!"

"That's right. But Sai Akuto did not die in the end..." said Bouichirou as if recalling that fact.

"Yeah, that was odd. What was with that?"

"Predictions of the future are nothing more than predictions. When the issue grows too complex, those predictions can be wrong. However, this one was still a bit odd. After all, Sai Akuto should have died when he released the seal."

Bouichirou brought a hand to his chin thoughtfully and Eiko vigorously agreed.

"That's right! That's what you said!"

"By the way, it seems someone else released the seal and Sai Akuto saved her. The secret to what changed the prediction may lie there."

"What do you mean?"

Eiko climbed up onto Bouichirou's lap and wrapped her arms around

his neck. Bouichirou stroked her head as he replied.

"He has grown in an unexpectedly short period of time. Also, mana control is strongly linked to one's mental state. Something must have made him take everything more seriously."

"Amazing! You really do know everything, don't you!?" exclaimed Eiko like an excited child.

Bouichirou smiled bashfully.

"I have not lived for so long for nothing. Now, don't you need to provide your family with a report on your job?"

With that comment, Bouichirou lightly smacked Eiko on the ass. She wriggled her body teasingly and then ran out of the office.

With Eiko gone, Bouichirou let out a long sigh. He grabbed a pendant from around his neck and toyed with it in his hand. The pendant was made into a locket. When he opened it, a holographic photograph of a beautiful blonde woman floated up.

He wiped off his lap as if Eiko had dirtied it by sitting there, adjusted his position in the chair, and gazed at the photograph.

"It has been so long... I am growing weary. It is about time I finally settled things once and for all with that demon king," muttered Bouichirou to no one in particular.

Afterword

First of all, this is Mizuki Shoutarou. How are you doing? I'm doing well enough.

Anyway, this is Volume 2. And here is the second afterword. I should start by mentioning the afterword from last time. I did not receive a giant pile of information on horrible food around the country (not that I really expected to), so I am glad to see the Japanese people have a proper sense of taste. However, this means I cannot continue on the same topic. It makes sense since bad restaurants will normally go out of business.

At any rate, there is no chance my twisted personality will change anytime soon, so I will be discussing something similar. What has been interesting me lately is the term 善行. I am not talking about Zengyou, the area in Kanto. I mean Zenkou, the term meaning "good deeds". This might be sudden, but I recently realized that people always brag about the bad things they have done in the past but never brag about the good things they have done. If bragging about that became popular among the thugs hanging around the cities, Japan would become a better place. Now, let's simulate what a conversation like that would sound like.

"I may not look it now, but I used to be really good person."

"Really, senpai? You don't look it at all."

"See what I mean? But I was a well-known volunteer back in my hometown."

"Seriously? That's amazing!"

"When I was younger, I was satisfied just giving money to charity, but I was pissed when I learned those things don't get the money to the people who really need it."

"Yeah, some charities just use the money to run their organization. They're pathetic."

"You know a lot about charities. Did you used to give money?"

"No, I'm nothing like you, senpai. I was nothing. You know how you can donate money to sponsor a foreign orphan? I'm sure someone like you has heard of it, but that's what I did. I could only pay ten thousand yen or so, so I really was nothing..."

"Would you look at that? You've really got a good side to you."

"C'mon, I'm nothing compared to you, senpai."

I'm sure you can tell this would never catch on. You just can't brag about good deeds. Good deeds are difficult and boring. I'm not sure there's anything harder to brag about than good deeds. Even if you send your good deeds to the editorial department, they will not be mentioned in a future afterword.

Okay, about the actual novel.

This was another novel that really doesn't need much explanation or commentary. Just have fun reading it. I put a lot of energy into writing it, so I hope you all put a lot of energy into reading it. While you're reading it, try yelling out as loud as you can in the middle of the night when no one else is around. At any rate, it looks like I will actually get to put out more and more of these novels, so keep reading more and more of them. I will continue to do my very best.

On to the thanks.

First, my illustrator, Itou Souichi-san. I think Itou-san is aiming to be world-class. When I saw the roughs for this volume, I was utterly shocked. Personally, I think the student council president is perfect. This is the first time I've seen a character that I would not want as a friend, lover, or acquaintance but still think is great. This was unexpected even for me, the one who designed her personality.

Next, my editor, Ohashi-san. Once more, thank you for all your effort. I hope I can finish the next one with more time to spare. When people ask me if I intend to say that over and over again, I will answer no. Oddly enough, though, the work always takes so much time to complete. I will continue working while praying I will get faster at it.

And lastly, I give my thanks to everyone else involved.

Now then, it looks like we can enjoy this together even more from now on!





「待ってくれ、
なんの説明もなく
行ってしまうって、
どういふことだよ？」

「さようなら」



登場人物紹介

はっとりしゅんと
服部 純子

阿九斗が気になる一途で純情なクラス委員長。

さいあくと
紗伊阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると予言された「善良な」主人公。

えとろふじと
江藤 不三子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師。

そが
白薙 けいな

落ちこぼれな天然少女。阿九斗に懐いている。

みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。

こるね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。



Prologue

That girl was as beautiful as a doll. Her green hair and green eyes caught the eye. Her well-featured face was beautiful, but no expression could be seen there.

She was a L'Isle-Adam.

That was a thinking artificial object that stood at the pinnacle of magical society. She was not just as beautiful as a doll; she was a doll. That was why the odd name of Korone suited her so well and why the odd situation she was currently in was so appropriate for her.

Korone stood tall in a field during the evening while surrounded by a screen displaying video footage. This screen was created by gathering the tiny particles in the atmosphere known as mana. It wrapped around her like a tube of translucent plastic, so from a distance, she looked like a doll inside in a tube-shaped package.

The screen displayed ten men in suits whose faces were hidden by a video effect. They were all sitting in chairs, but the chairs and walls behind them were all different. It seemed they were all being filmed in different places and displayed on the same screen.

"I believe I sent in the data for my report," spoke Korone comfortably.

However, her voice always sounded the same, so no actual emotion could be taken from it.

Whether that was a simple observation or a complaint was hard to tell, but then one of the men on the screen opened his mouth to speak. His voice was altered to hide his identity.

"Part of being human is being unable to relax unless we actually see the person's face and hear their voice from time to time."

Another man replied without waiting for Korone to say anything.

"We are of course not talking about your face, Korone-kun. We mean us. Speaking via you is a good way of coming to a consensus."

"But you are all hiding your faces and voices," pointed out Korone.

None of the men could tell if she was trying to make a joke or not, so several clicks of the tongue and bitter laughs could be heard simultaneously.

"Is an artificial human dissatisfied with the system? It only matters that we can see each other."

"Do not get so upset with her. An artificial human is a system as well. Do not forget that they have been made so they will not be completely controlled by humans. Humans have a tendency of doing atrocious things to the slaves they have complete control over. That is why artificial humans have been made to talk back and make jokes."

"I know that. And making objections is fine. Artificial humans have feelings too. And the sense of self that does not initially exist begins to

appear as time passes from their creation. The principle behind this is still unknown, though."

"If I was rude, I apologize. I was only speaking the truth." said Korone indifferently. She continued to say, "However, I doubt the members of the Cabinet Secretariat gathered to discuss artificial human intellect."

"You are correct. This is about Sai Akuto."

"He has caused quite a problem by awakening Codename Black Dragon."

"Some are insisting this means he has already become the demon king."

"Those are the hardliners."

"As you know, the cabinet supervises the churches of each religion, but the control of the individual believers is not perfect due to the gods being too systemized."

"There are some idiots in the Diet who truly believe in these gods that are nothing but a system. They are intent on nothing more than improving the lives of their fellow believers."

"This is a bit off topic, but we are explaining it because an artificial human like you may find this hard to understand. What we mean is, humans will start a great commotion without bothering to check what exactly a demon king is."

"And what is a demon king?" asked Korone.

"That is a secret. We cannot tell you."

"Even though I am an artificial human?"

"Exactly. Technically, we do not even know. For us, not being able to publicly announce something is the same as not knowing it. However, we do know that Sai Akuto is not currently a demon king."

"Isn't that a contradiction? You know he is not a demon king yet you cannot announce it."

"This sort of exception exists everywhere."

"So I should just ignore it."

"Now then, on to the real issue at hand. From what I have learned, the hardliners' claims have basis. Ever since he awakened Codename Black Dragon, demonic beasts have had a great increase in activity in various places."

"It is only natural for even those who are not ignorant to wish for Sai Akuto's death."

"Even our opinions are split. A few of us have even suggested assassination."

"However, the high priest of your god Markt insists Sai Akuto deserves protection under the law as a citizen."

"It seems this confrontation will never be resolved just by talking it out."

"That is why we wish to suggest another means of resolving the situation."

"We just need to take away Sai Akuto's freedom."

"I believe arresting someone with no clear charges against them would have the same problems as assassination," commented Korone.

The members of the Cabinet Office laughed at that.

"We are men too. We know that it is possible to lose one's freedom of one's own free will."

"Please speak more clearly."

"Ha ha ha. What we mean is..."

"Sai Akuto is interested in women, is he not?"

"In the general meaning, yes," agreed Korone.

The men on the screen smiled.

"Do you still not get it? We will take away his freedom with a woman. He simply needs to become involved with one. It is not uncommon for a woman to turn a man's entire world upside down. We will control him with a woman."

"That is obscene," said Korone indifferently.

The men cleared their throats.

"We know it is."

"But we will not be leading him to commit a crime."

"The records of us doing so would remain with the god Markt, after all. We are not priests, so we do not have the authority to erase those records."

"However, this will be nothing more than romance. He will be acting of his own free will. Even if he learns we are behind it all, he will not be able to betray her. At least not once he has become involved with her."

"Yes. That is the type of personality he has."

"And so we will be taking measures to carry this out. This is only natural. It will avoid a war."

"I understand," said Korone flatly.

"Do not act like this has nothing to do with you. This is a covert mission. The order is being given to you, Korone."

"I belong to the church of Markt. I cannot obey that order."

When Korone refused, one of the men on the screen raised his hand. The hand held a single paper.

"We have approval from the church of Markt. The electronic certificate will be sent to your head."

"I take it that means I am to help with the Cabinet Office's mission as a member of the church of Markt."

"That is exactly what it means."

"Then I cannot refuse." A dull light could be seen deep in Korone's eyes. "I have received the certificate. I have also received the mission details."

Once Korone finished speaking, the men all spoke with relief in their voices.

"It seems the issue has been resolved."

"No one tried to solve the problem ahead of time with the previous

war.”

“This was the suggestion with the most common ground.”

“He seems to be quite straight-laced, but he is still a teenage boy. This should work.”

“Korone needs to make sure it does. We are leaving this up to you, Korone.”

Korone nodded with no change of expression.

“I will do my very best to ensure Sai Akuto falls for the seduction.”

“Excellent. Unfortunately, you will be forced to take responsibility if you fail in this mission. Do not forget that.”

“Take responsibility? Will I be dismissed?”

“We need not answer now.”

The screen disappeared before Korone could reply.

This left Korone standing alone in the evening field.

If anyone had seen her, they would likely have thought her expression was one of sorrow.

"Humans say we have emotions yet they do not properly understand what that means. How very strange," muttered Korone in the blowing wind.

Anyone who knew her would have been surprised if they had heard that. Her words remained indifferent, yet they were filled with powerful emotion. And as if to prove it, Korone began complaining despite there being no one to hear her.

"Seducing someone is difficult for me. And I doubt it will go well..."

Korone began trudging along in resignation.

"Even I can fall in love. Not that he would ever realize it."

Chapter 1: Let's Go on a Beach Field Trip

Part 1

Sai Akuto was troubled.

Then again, he had never not been troubled ever since it had been predicted he would become a demon king in the future. His classmates in Constant Magic Academy constantly feared him and he was caught up in some sort of trouble on a daily basis. On top of it all, he had recently made friends with a giant dragon that could only be seen as an inappropriate being to have as a friend. He felt as if he was gradually walking down the path to becoming a demon king.

He was worrying in his dorm room bed. After the day's classes, he had been summoned by his homeroom teacher Torii Mitsuko. She had given the following announcement.

"You see, we have a beach field trip coming up, but you will be staying behind, Sai-kun. Sorry."

Mitsuko-sensei usually had a very open attitude, but she had actually looked a bit apologetic this time.

"Is there no changing that?" Akuto had asked.

"Hmm, how should I put it...? There are a lot of issues going into this. You know how we would choose to forgo our sports festival if the emperor died? It's something like that... Wait. Or is it?"

When Akuto had seen Mitsuko-sensei trying to find the words, he had grasped the general situation.

"In other words, it would cause a lot of friction if I left the school, so the school has made this decision for me."

Mitsuko-sensei had clapped her hands together at that declaration.

"Yes, that. That's exactly it. It helps that you're so smart, Sai-kun. Yes."

"Being complimented like that is not going to make me happy."

"Don't be picky. And only the first years are going. The other years will still be here, so you won't be all alone. First year classes won't be held for a while, so you can just do whatever you want."

Mitsuko-sensei had irresponsibly patted Akuto on the shoulder.

"Well, it can't be helped. And missing out on the beach field trip is not enough to get too worked up over."

Akuto had shrugged.

Mitsuko-sensei had then smiled in relief.

"I'm glad. I thought you might get angry over not getting to see the girls in their swimsuits."

“Do I really look like that kind of person?”

Akuto had frowned.

He had perfectly beautiful looks, but he had been born with a harsh look in the eyes. He looked exactly like a clever villain. Mitsuko-sensei had then peered closely at that face of his.

“True. You look like the type who always has half-naked girls serving him. I suppose a swimsuit would be nothing new for you. With as much access to girls as you have, being denied for a short while should be easy.”

“While I take issue with your reasoning...you are correct that this will be easy for me. At any rate, I understand the situation.”

With that, Akuto had left the classroom.

However...

—Ahh, I’m never going to get a normal school life, am I?

Akuto was quite depressed. While lying in his bed, he covered his eyes with his right hand.

His personality did not match his appearance at all, but he also liked to make himself look good in front of others. He could not bring himself to

say he had always wanted to go on a beach field trip.

—It isn't the swimsuits I care about. I just want a normal life... I just want to swim and... Actually, what do you even do during a beach field trip? I don't even know...

"A beach field trip is an event for one to make intimate contact with girls," said a sudden voice from very nearby.

"Wah!"

Akuto jumped up in shock. At some point, Korone had gotten close enough to stare right into his face.

This was the boys' dorm and this was Akuto's personal room, but it was normal for Korone to be here. She was Akuto's observer, so she had to be with him at all times. At night, she would sleep in the storage shelf near the ceiling. For that reason, it was normal for Korone to be near Akuto, but something was odd this time.

It was hard to explain the aura around Korone, but Akuto felt that it was different today.

"Wh-what is it?"

"An event for one to make intimate contact with girls," repeated Korone as she climbed into the bed to lie next to Akuto.

"Why are you lying next to me?"

"Because I want to. Is that a problem?"

Korone brought an arm around Akuto's chest to push his upright upper body back into the bed. She then brought her face right next to Akuto's.

He was used to seeing that ideal face, but it still made him nervous when it was that close. He could feel his heart rate increasing. Artificial humans needed to breathe in order to speak, so her breath tickled at his nose. Her breath contained a strange scent that was different from a human's.

"U-um, are you teasing me again?" asked Akuto while forcing a calm look on his face.

He had been teased like this by Korone several times in the past, so he could not help but be on his guard.

"No, I am not teasing you. If you are embarrassed, I promise to keep this a secret. No matter what you do here, I will not tell anyone. I will obscure the more emotional areas in the records for my reports."

Korone spoke with the tone of a police detective reading a suspect his rights. As she did so, she slid her hand along the top of Akuto's body. She moved it from his chest, to his belly, and then even lower...

"W-wait a second!"

Akuto grabbed her hand to stop her.

"What is it?"

"You have to ask? Please stop teasing me like this."

Akuto escaped Korone's arm, raised his upper body, and sat cross-legged. He faced Korone with a diligent expression.

Korone also sat up on the bed. However, she held her knees in her arms. She was still wearing the short skirt of the school uniform, so this pose boldly showed her panties off to Akuto.

"What is it?" Korone asked when Akuto remained silent.

Akuto shook his head and looked up and to the side.

"A-at any rate... Weren't you the one that had something to tell me? You said something about a beach field trip being an event for one to make contact with girls."

"Yes, and you can now go on the beach field trip."

Korone looked at Akuto with upturned eyes while opened and closing her legs.

"Eh?"

For an instant, Akuto stared back at Korone, not understanding what she had said. But he was quickly overpowered by Korone's gaze and looked away again. However, he spoke up in surprise when he recalled what she had said.

"Eh? I can go on the beach field trip?"

"That is correct. You can now go on the beach field trip."

"But I thought the school was keeping me from going..."

"I have taken on responsibility."

"No, you didn't have to go that far... After all, it seems rumors about me have spread beyond the school. It is only natural to take action to prevent any problems from occurring. Not to mention that this is just a beach field trip."

As Akuto grumbled, Korone spoke quietly.

"Was this only a nuisance?"

Her voice sounded somehow sorrowful, so Akuto looked back at her face.

Her green eyes were filled with rare emotion. Akuto felt those eyes were moist with tears and filled with sorrow. But before that thought could fully form within him, he started speaking.

"That is not what I meant. I am just confused because I cannot figure out why you would do this for me. Why would you go out of your way to do this?"

As he grew flustered, Korone buried her chin in her knees as if she was peeking out at Akuto.

"I heard the beach field trip is an event for one to make intimate contact with girls. I thought you might grow bolder when it comes to this if you went."

Korone pointed down. Akuto did not bother looking down at what she was pointing at. Korone still had her knees up, so it was plainly obvious what she was indicating when she pointed down between her legs.

"I-I said to stop teasing me. And I am a follower of Ko Ro. If I did that, it would block my path to priesthood."

Akuto stepped down from the bed to move away from Korone.

Korone stretched out her legs and lay down on the bed.

"I will sleep here tonight."

"No, that would be a problem."

Akuto shook his head and Korone stared at him.

"Your disinterest in girls may be a type of illness."

"Th-that is not the case."

"Then please sleep with me," she said without taking her eyes off him.

However, her tone of voice and expression remained unchanged, so Akuto honestly did not know how to respond.

—K-Korone really is acting differently from normal. She doesn't seem to be teasing me, but I can't think of any reason why she would be trying to seduce me.

"I-I'll pass."

"Why?"

"Why? B-because you're acting oddly, Korone."

"By oddly, do you mean my actions do not make me attractive as a girl?"

"Th-there is definitely something a little off about it..."

"What am I doing wrong?"

"No...I-it isn't that you are doing anything wrong. But I don't think your actions are really going to put me in the mood..."

Akuto was unsure how to argue, so he just let the conversation go where it would. He was worried how Korone would respond, but she gave up surprisingly easily.

"I see," she said before standing up and returning to her usual storage shelf.

—She isn't feeling down, is she? No, she doesn't seem the type.

Akuto was worried, but he decided to go to sleep since the bed was vacant now.

—Come to think of it, I didn't thank her for allowing me to go on the beach field trip. The conversation may have taken an odd turn, but I still need to thank her.

As he thought that, his eyelids grew heavy.

However, he was unaware of one thing. After making sure Akuto was asleep, Korone muttered to herself while watching his sleeping face.

"If he realizes I am not teasing him, will he change his mind? No, I

should assume Akuto-san is correct and it is my approach that is at fault.”

Korone then pulled up data from stories of the past to search for what boys liked.

Part 2

"It's morning. Wake up. If you don't, it'll be an elbow drop."

Akuto was woken by that odd statement followed by a powerful impact.

"Wah! What, what?"

He opened his eyes to find Korone straddling his body. She was staring down at him with her usual expressionless look.

"Wh-what is it?"

"It's your fault for not waking up, onii-chan. If I don't wake you up like this, you just keep sleeping. What a good-for-nothing brother," said Korone in her usual monotone voice.

"....."

Akuto always woke up early. He would wake up at around 5 for some light exercise and a shower. He looked over at the clock on his desk to find it was 4:40 AM.

—Why is she complaining that I'm not waking up this early? No, I suppose that "onii-chan" is the strangest part.



Akuto's mind had yet to fully awaken, so his blank thoughts only made it that far. However, that was not the only strange aspect of it all. Korone was wearing a childish dress. He had never seen her wear it before. Her slender body looked good in the dress, but the skirt was extremely short. Straddling Akuto left the lower half of her body almost completely visible.

"No, wait... What is going on?"

"You still aren't going to wake up, onii-chan? Then I will have to go for the Denki Anma."

While making that insane comment in an indifferent voice, Korone moved her body back while still straddling him. She then placed her sock-covered foot on Akuto's crotch.

"Wah! Wait! I'm awake!"

"It's your fault for not waking up, onii-chan. Rub rub."

"Ee! Wah wah wah!"

Akuto desperately struggled and somehow managed to escape out from under Korone.

"Wh-what is going on? You're acting weird, Korone."

While breathing erratically, Akuto balled up on the edge of the bed.

"This isn't weird at all, onii-chan."

Korone tilted her head in puzzlement. However, the gesture looked a lot like a doll with a broken head that was about to fall off.

"That's what I'm saying is weird!"

"Would onii-sama be better than onii-chan?"

"That's not the issue!"

"Then would you prefer a childhood friend from next door?"

"That's not the issue either!"

"Then what kind of girl would you be unable to resist dragging into bed with you if she came to wake you?"

"How should I know!?"

"How very selfish of you. Teenage boys are quite difficult. But it does not seem you are lying. I checked with my foot and your penis was not hard despite it being morning."

"Please don't say that kind of thing so casually..."

Akuto was utterly shocked, but he was also relieved that Korone was acting normally again.

—Thank goodness. This means she hasn't gone completely haywire. But that means she really is trying to arouse me... That is weird enough in and of itself. Is there something behind this?

He turned back toward Korone to find her opening the bag she had left on his desk and pulling out a white apron.

"Then I will try everything I have until something works. First, I will try the naked apron."

"You don't have to do this! Why do you think you do?" asked Akuto.

Korone suddenly stopped moving.

"Do you not like this?"

"Not at all!" answered Akuto reflexively.

However, Akuto grew uneasy when she did not immediately reply.

—Huh? Did I go too far?

Finally, Korone opened her mouth to speak.

"That is a problem. Hearing that from someone dear to me makes me think I am not attractive," she said slowly.

Korone always spoke so indifferently that hearing such an emotional comment from her made Akuto feel all the more uneasy.

—No, wait. Come to think of it, artificial humans do have emotions.

Could she be worried that I don't like her? In that case, I cannot hurt her. However, I cannot say anything frivolous either. My only option is to give her my honest feelings.

Akuto was the type who would make the politically correct decision at times like this but would also want to make himself look good. He placed his hands on Korone's shoulders and stared her in the eye.

"I want to approach women seriously, so I cannot do it like this. But that does not mean I am not interested at all. It is just that I want a relationship of honest and pure kindness that does not rely on that other kind of thing. And I know you have those honest feelings within you. I do not know why you are doing this, but if you are worried that I do not like you, then do not worry. That is not the case at all. Also, I failed to mention it yesterday, but I am grateful that you arranged to have me go on the beach field trip. Thank you."

Korone froze in place when she heard that. It seemed she was having trouble deciding how to respond, but it was hard to distinguish it from her usual expressionlessness. At any rate, she finally replied.

"Please do not make this so troublesome. I am fine with a purely physical relationship."

"Wha-...?"

Akuto's entire body stiffened in shock when he heard that.

And then five o'clock arrived. The clock on the desk began emitting an

electronic tone.

In that instant, Korone slipped from Akuto's arms and returned the apron to her bag as if nothing had happened.

"Now, if you do not hurry up with your usual exercise and shower, you will not make it in time for breakfast."

"R-right..."

Akuto nodded oddly stiffly, silenced the clock's alarm, and left the room. Korone watched Akuto leave, placed her index fingers on either cheek, and pushed them up. This created something like a smile, but her eyes were still not smiling.

"Is even a purely physical relationship off the table because I am an artificial human? Perhaps I can manage if I learn to smile... No, I cannot analyze humans, so I cannot know for sure. Perhaps I should try using non-human attraction," muttered Korone in a rare tone of worry.

Akuto's questions about the change to Korone's attitude only continued to grow. Even as he walked along the path from the dorm to school, he was oddly conscious of Korone walking behind him. At some point she had changed into a maid uniform and had even grown cat ears. It seemed she was still trying to arouse him.

"You sure are cute today, Korone-chan," said Hiroshi.

"I see. So you're into this kind of thing," commented Akuto as if it made an odd amount of sense.

"C'mon, aniki. That isn't what I meant. I just meant she's cute."

Hiroshi embarrassedly scratched at his head with the expression of a mischievous boy.

He was Miwa Hiroshi, a classmate who praised Akuto as his "aniki" despite being the same age. The boy would approach Akuto who was usually feared as a demon king, so Akuto viewed him as an important friend.

"I would say it is not just today and that I am always cute," declared Korone coolly.

"Ah ha ha. That's right."

When Hiroshi honestly laughed at that, Korone added, "But Akuto-san is ignoring that attractiveness."

"....."

The situation suddenly grew awkward. Akuto stole a glance at Hiroshi's face and it seemed the boy was beginning to realize something was odd about how Korone was acting.

"O-oh, right. It seems I can actually go on the beach field trip," said

Akuto to Hiroshi in an unnatural tone of voice.

He hoped to change the subject this way because he knew Hiroshi would be delighted. However, Hiroshi's expression darkened for an instant when he heard it. That alone could have been nothing, but he then looked at Akuto and gave a forced smile.

"Th-that's great, aniki!"

"Y-yeah..."

Akuto's expression stiffened further. They were forced to walk the rest of the way to school in silence. But during morning homeroom, Akuto learned why Hiroshi had acted the way he had.

"I have a warning concerning the beach field trip: Sai Akuto-kun will now be taking part."

The class began muttering when Mitsuko-sensei gave that announcement. Akuto was used to this reaction, but it still caused a slight stir in his heart.

As if to land the finishing blow, Mitsuko-sensei then added, "We will be staying in a facility owned by the academy, so it would normally not matter who goes. However, the island this facility is on has a legend concerning the demon king. The residents of the island have passed down the following story. As an omen of the demon king's return, a demonic beast will appear from the lake at the center of this island. However, a hero will appear at that time and defeat the demonic beast.

Afterwards, the hero will also defeat the demon king.”

Silence fell over the class. When the muttering passed a certain point, this is what happened. Everyone turned around toward where Akuto sat in the very back of the classroom.

Akuto was unsure how to respond, but he began speaking because it would look bad if he grew flustered.

“Making such a big deal out of a legend passed down by ignorant islanders is nothing more than foolish. For one thing, the demon king war occurred only one hundred years ago. The current national system existed at that time, so there would be official records. There is no room for a legend like that to form! Also, none of the previous predictions of the future have been accurate, so this legend is completely false. I would prefer if people did not get so worked up over such things!”

Akuto slammed a fist against his desk.

His tone of voice and attitude were so over-the-top that it actually made him less persuasive, but his classmates still looked away in confusion because his actual words made a decent argument.

However, a completely different reaction came from an unexpected place. And it was quite a shock to Akuto.

“Sorry, aniki. That island is my home,” said Hiroshi apologetically after turning toward Akuto.

—Oh, so that's why he reacted like that on the way to school!

Akuto panicked.

"No, I should be apologizing. I wasn't trying to mock your hometown..."

"No, it's fine. It's true that my family is ignorant," spat out Hiroshi.

This did not seem to be modesty or self-deprecation. It seemed Hiroshi really did dislike his hometown.

This bothered Akuto, but Mitsuko-sensei gave a loud warning to move the topic on to something else. When he managed to speak with Hiroshi in the dining hall at lunch, it seemed the boy held complex emotions behind it all.

"It really is a back country place. And as you said, aniki, a legend from 100 years ago is ridiculous. Some people from the time of the war are still alive today. They would know the truth. There is also no record in history of a demon king being defeated by a hero, so I can only think the islanders came up with the legend to feel better about themselves. They have nothing important, so they have this despicable desire for the hero who defeats the demon king to be from their island," said Hiroshi with a bitter expression.

It almost sounded like he was double-checking his own past rather than speaking to Akuto.

Akuto was not sure why Hiroshi was speaking like this.

"But your family lives on that island, right? Even if you think it is despicable, I'm not sure you should say it that way."

"That may be true, but it's my problem."

Hiroshi pouted his lips. Akuto would have been lying had he said this did not anger him a bit.

"I don't like that way of talking."

"Yeah, but you can't understand this problem, aniki. After all, you're powerful."

"That has nothing to do with this."

"That's not what I mean. That's not what I mean!"

Hiroshi shut his mouth as if to say he did not want to talk about it anymore. Akuto tried to speak to him again, but he quickly cleared his tableware and stood up.

—What was that? Hating your family has nothing to do with being powerful or not.

Akuto did not like it, but he decided not to worry about it because he figured Hiroshi would be over it by tomorrow.

Part 3

Akuto returned to his dorm room after school and first opened up the drawer to his desk. He stepped up onto his chair and carefully placed his foot inside the open drawer. It looked like he was trying to flip over his desk or break the drawer, but a transfer magic circle had been drawn inside the drawer. The black dragon named Peterhausen had set it up because he figured Akuto would not want to walk all the way underground every time. This meant he could climb into the drawer to travel to the demon king's underground palace below the school.

Peterhausen was the black dragon the demon king had ridden during the war. He had been sealed instead of killed and had recently been revived. He had now become Akuto's dragon, but Akuto had no intention of using him in any way. Their relationship was a delicate one.

"You should try starting a war already. It would be a good experience for you," said Peterhausen peacefully as he lay curled up like a dog.

Despite his peaceful tone, his actual words were quite dangerous. He was also 15 meters long and his body was covered in black glittering scales. All of that combined with his imposing voice made him sound like a demon servant trying to destroy the world in his spare time.

Peterhausen's bed was located in the center of the underground palace. The palace was wide and its ceiling was frighteningly high up, so it held enough space for Peterhausen to move around. This was the exact place at which Akuto and Peterhausen had fought each other. However, the dragon rarely moved from atop the pile of cushions. He seemed to like them.

Akuto stood in front of Peterhausen, gave a bitter smile, and said, "I feel bad giving you the same answer every time, but I am not a demon king. Nor do I intend to become one."

"The time will come when you will realize becoming one is the best answer." Peterhausen snorted. "Now, I doubt you came here for no reason."

Akuto nodded at the dragon's implied question.

"I have a question for you. I think it is a bit of a stupid question, but please hear me out."

Akuto then described the island legend he had heard not long before. He had thought Peterhausen would make fun of him, but the dragon listened seriously.

"Yes, that is indeed odd. It may be a mere desire as Hiroshi suggested, but one aspect interests me."

"What is that?"

"What we often call prophecies are nothing more than predictions. In other words, we can only predict the future when we have data from the past. Even the fact that you are a demon king is a prediction based on data from the past. However, a hero has never existed in the past."

"Then maybe the prediction about me is wrong too."

"Those are two different things. As for whether a hero really has existed, I can at least say that I have never fought a hero in my lifetime," said Peterhausen as he opened his eyes wide mockingly.

"I see. So the odds are good that this is just a superstition."

Akuto folded his arms.

The current imperial society had been systemized since 1000 years ago. The gods were nothing more than man-made recording devices. Following the good sense programmed into those gods provided various social services. That system had never once been destroyed. However, the people who could not understand that system that was lacking in mystery would worship the gods as literal gods. This was what ultimately led to superstitions existing alongside the system.

"What I found interesting is that this seems like a true prophecy no matter how ridiculous it sounds. Not a prediction, but a prophecy. Normally, the demon king would never visit that island...Miwa Island was it called? The previous one did not. It is a solitary island to the south, after all."

"Please do not say such ominous things. Also, why can't you tell me anything more about the previous demon king?" asked Akuto.

Peterhausen opened one eye and made an odd look. He may have meant it similar to raising an eyebrow.

"Because you refuse to become a demon king yourself."

"And I am not changing my mind on that."

Akuto sighed and placed his hands on his hips.

"I do not wish to act too roughly, so I am quietly remaining here. However, if things grow too inconvenient I may suddenly leave and begin destroying things. If that happens, there is no going back for you. You will officially be my master. Ha ha ha," laughed Peterhausen.

His breath created a whirlwind. Akuto covered his face and grimaced.

"That would be a problem. And I will soon be leaving for a little while."

"You are going to this island for a beach field trip, correct? If you are worried about this prophecy, shouldn't you stay behind?"

"I know it's just a superstition, so it doesn't matter."

"Is that so? At any rate, if it grows dangerous, call for me. I will rush to your side. That is when the war begins. I can feel it boiling up within me."

Peterhausen gave a villainous smile and Akuto sighed.

"Let's keep this peaceful."

"You too are a man of war."

"That is not something I want to hear from a dragon carrying a napping girl."

Akuto indicated something he had spotted lying almost buried in Peterhausen's side.

A few clumps of pure red hair could be seen sticking out from the lustrous black scales. They were swaying with a certain rhythm. It was the rhythm of a sleeping human. Soga Keena was napping while using Peterhausen as a pillow. Her usually relaxed face was even looser than normal. Looking at her face had a way of making one sleepy even when she was awake. Akuto could feel an effect similar to hypnotism.

"She is the first to ever approach me without fear. Even my master maintained a certain amount of tension with me," said Peterhausen in admiration.

"She does have a special personality."

Akuto shrugged. Looking at Keena's face put him in a strange mood. He was fairly certain he had met Keena when they were younger, but Keena had apparently forgotten. It was also possible it was his memory at fault.

That bizarre feeling left Akuto overly concerned with Keena. He felt like there was something special about her that he did not feel with his other friends.

—Who exactly is Keena...? Even when I try to ask her, the conversation always ends up turning in some completely different direction.

As Akuto thought, he was suddenly punched in the head from behind.

"Ow!"

"Hey, enough of that indecent look. Don't leer at girls like that."

Those words were spoken in monotone from behind him. He turned around to find Korone. For some reason, she was wearing a different school's uniform. She had her hands on her hips in a pose of anger, but he had difficulty deciding what she was doing since her face was as expressionless as ever.

"Um...? What?" asked Akuto.

Korone tilted her head.

"You do not understand? I was going for the classmate who is jealous despite not being your girlfriend. Did you feel it?"

"...Not particularly."

"That is a problem. At any rate, please stop looking at Keena-san with such an indecent look in your eyes."

"I had no such look in my eyes!" denied Akuto.

"That is fine then. I cannot have you getting along too well."

Korone moved in between Akuto and Keena. As Peterhausen watched on, he spoke up curiously.

"What are you two doing? This does not sound like the conversation of an observer artificial human and a demon king."

Korone immediately replied, "Please stay out of this. This is our problem. It is a problem between members of the opposite sex."

"Please stop talking about it like that..." said Akuto in denial, but Peterhausen grinned.

"The demon king will naturally be popular with the ladies. It makes me jealous."

"Then, Peterhausen-san, please take Keena-san," said Korone with a perfectly serious expression.

Peterhausen nodded with an equally serious expression.

"Excellent. I had taken a liking to her. She is the one that made this bed for me. We can surely make an excellent family together."

"What nonsense are you two talking about!?" loudly cut in Akuto.

As soon as he did, Korone and Peterhausen both turned toward him and froze in place. Korone was expressionless, but Peterhausen had a slight look of shock. Akuto began to wonder if he had shouted out more loudly than he had thought.

"U-um, I mean that you should ask Keena's opinion before saying that kind of thing."

Akuto waved his hands in denial as he made that confused comment.

"That was obviously a joke," said Peterhausen in annoyance.

Akuto smiled awkwardly.

"O-of course it was. I just meant it was an imprudent joke. Ah ha ha..."

"By any chance, do you love Keena-san?" asked Korone like a cross-examining attorney as she stuck her face right in front of Akuto's face.

"Wh-what do you mean by that?"

Akuto flinched back.

"I mean exactly what I said. Do you wish to form a sexual relationship

with her and then marry her? Do you wish to live a life of debauchery with her in which you do nothing but repeatedly perform obscene acts with her?"

"D-don't be ridiculous..."

"No, you are not dodging this question. I am not asking if you think it would be possible; I am asking what you want deep down."

Korone moved further forward.

"Wh-why do I have to tell you what I want?"

"I wish to know your sexual preferences. Once I do, I can service you sexually."

"Wha-...!?"

Akuto could not help but be dumbfounded.

—I-I have to do something...

As he stood there frozen with sweat pouring from his body, a goddess of salvation appeared.

"What...? Why is it so loud?" asked Keena sleepily as she woke up. "Oh, A-chan and Korone-chan are here. But you mustn't be so loud. Pe-chan

was trying to sleep.”

She smiled and rubbed Peterhausen’s head.

She had apparently started calling Peterhausen “Pe-chan”. The name did not suit the dragon’s frightening looks in the slightest, but it seemed he had taken a liking to it. Not only did he obediently let her rub his head, he even narrowed his eyes in a smile. Even if he could be communicated with, he was still a 15 meter beast. And in Peterhausen’s case, the communication ability only made him worse. He had a wild temperament and was quite proud. He might have actually been less frightening had he not understood language. Akuto became painfully aware that Keena was no normal person.

“Sorry about waking you. Oh, right. I’ll be going on the beach field trip now.”

That news caused Keena’s face to light up.

“Really? Thank goodness. If you weren’t going, I wasn’t going to go either. But if you’re going, I’ll go with you. I can’t wait.”

Keena smiled.

“S-sure...” vaguely agreed Akuto.

He would normally have been delighted as well, but her smile felt oddly bright after what Korone had said.

"Why are you looking so love struck?" asked Korone as she jabbed Akuto's back with her elbow.

"W-wait a second. Something has been off about you since yesterday, Korone."

Akuto turned around to ask that question, but Korone immediately shook her head.

"No, there is no problem. I am only performing my duties as always."

"....."

Akuto could only fall silent at that, but he was worried about how oddly she was acting.

—There is obviously something strange going on here. I just hope it doesn't develop into anything too weird.

Akuto was growing more and more worried about the upcoming beach field trip, but Keena then pointed out something that gave him even more of a headache.

"But if I go, Pe-chan will be all alone."

"Oh, you're right."

He had never really thought about it, but only he and Keena could talk with Peterhausen who was still surrounded by mysteries. Given the dragon's temperament, he would likely not go out of his way to do anything Akuto did not want, but if a stranger approached him in his sleep, he would not hesitate to kill that person. And the destruction could easily spread well beyond that one person.

"At the very least, we need to make sure no one comes here," said Akuto.

The palace was underneath the school. It may have been quite deep underground, but there were paths leading down to it from the school building. While it would be difficult, it was possible to work one's way here through the underground labyrinth.

"Don't worry. I have a great idea!" announced Keena confidently.

"Really?"

"Yeah, just leave it to me!"

Keena smacked her chest.

Seeing that, Akuto decided to leave the Peterhausen issue to Keena. He figured she would be able to handle it better than he could.

Part 4

But he later learned that Keena's method was extremely simple.

She asked Etou Fujiko to look after the dragon.

Fujiko was their upperclassman, so she would not go on the beach field trip. And after the recent incident, she had fallen so madly in love with Akuto that she had sworn her allegiance to him. She would never turn down a request to help him out no matter how sudden it was.

If that was all there was to it, this would not have been a problem. However, Peterhausen had nearly killed Fujiko during the aforementioned incident.

"Hyaaaaaahhhhh!"

Fujiko's legs collapsed out from under her when she saw Peterhausen. Keena had sent her a letter saying "Akuto has a favor to ask of you, so please come." She had stepped into the magic circle as instructed, but it had brought her right in front of that black dragon.

"You said you were sending for someone to look after me, but I did not expect the girl from the other day," grumbled Peterhausen sullenly.

This dragon had taken a liking to Keena. It was obvious a long black-haired beauty like Fujiko would not align with his tastes.

Meanwhile, Fujiko did not even feel like she was still alive. It was not often that one would prefer to have been thrown into a cage with a carnivorous wild animal.

"Kyaaahh! Nooooo!"

Fujiko kicked her legs around where she had collapsed out of fear, but she froze in place as soon as Peterhausen spoke to her.

"Silence, woman. Keep that up and I will kill you."

"Eeee.... U-understood..."

Fujiko began backing up while still on the floor.

"Th-then I will be going..."

"Wait. Who said you could leave?"

"Ee!"

"Akuto and Keena called you here to at least keep me entertained."

When Peterhausen called out to her, Fujiko gave an extremely stiff smile and timidly spoke.

"U-um... I was not told that... What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, Keena naps with me and tells me interesting stories. Surely you can do that."

"What?"

This request was not at all what Fujiko had been expecting. Peterhausen ignored her foolish expression and continued.

"But I have no desire to nap with someone like you. Try telling me an interesting story."

"Y-yes, understood."

Peterhausen simply wanted someone to talk to, but Fujiko was prideful and had been raised as a high-class girl. There was no chance anything she would say would be interesting.

—I-I will get back at you for this someday...

While making sure Peterhausen could not see, Fujiko secretly jotted down a note in her secret Grudge Notebook.

"Well? Out with it."

"Y-yes, right away! ...Um, the saying 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' actually originates from English yet it mysteriously sounds a lot like something from rakugo."

"That is not interesting."

"O-of course. That was just a digression. Now, a hedgehog went in for marriage counseling and..."

—I-I will kill you! I swear I will kill you one day!

Fujiko hid her tears of blood and Akuto and the others left for their beach field trip the following day.

Chapter 2: Seaside Album

Part 1

The flying bus was filled with tension. The bus was large enough to hold Akuto's entire class and Mitsuko-sensei, but it was still more cramped than the classroom. In other words, if two or three people were wrapped in an odd atmosphere, everyone in the bus could not help but notice.

And of course, it was Akuto and those around him causing that odd atmosphere this time.

"I-I am telling you to stop acting so obscenely!"

The girl shouting loudly within the bus was Hattori Junko, the class representative. She possessed a beauty that could be called dignified, but she was currently complaining to Korone with her face red. It was obvious her face was red more out of embarrassment than anger due to how she was desperately trying to remain calm to hide that embarrassment.



Korone was sitting on Akuto's lap. The seats were laid out in boxes where four passengers would face each other, but Akuto, Hiroshi, Keena, Junko, and Korone were all sitting in the same box. The extra one was Korone on Akuto's lap, but no one but her saw this as a welcome intrusion. Korone was clinging to Akuto like a movie villain's mistress.

Korone was wearing a swimsuit. It was a bikini made up of very little

cloth. The bottom was almost entirely made of strings above the hips. From below, it almost looked like she had simply attached a bandage to her crotch. The characteristic tail of a L'Isle-Adam tickled at Akuto's thigh. Due to Korone's slender frame, the chest of the swimsuit looked like nothing more than two tiny triangular pieces of cloth.

Korone replied to Junko's anger with her usual composure.

"You are jealous, aren't you? I understand. But do not worry. You merely need to wear this. Akuto will immediately fall for you."

Korone pulled a swimsuit out of the bag sitting on the seat to the side and held it toward Junko. It was nothing more than a single string in a Y-shape, so someone wearing it would be closer to "nude" than "practically nude".

Junko of course blushed further, stood up with a confused look in her eyes, and placed a hand on the short sword hanging from the waist of her uniform.

"I could never wear something like that! And why do I need to make him fall for me with a swimsuit!? Oh, I get it. When you say he will 'fall for me', you mean he will fall defeated after I cut him down! In that case, either he dies or I do! No, I will kill him and then die myself!"

For some reason, Junko tried to attack Akuto with her sword. He had no idea what was going on.

"Th-that isn't the case at all! Hattori-san, stop! Calm down! C'mon,

Korone. This was your fault, so apologize to her!"

Akuto placed a hand on Junko's short sword to restrain her and looked over to Korone.

Korone bowed her expressionless face.

"I am sorry. But I did this out of kindness. I only suggested you sit on Akuto's lap wearing a swimsuit because it would make him hard as a rock in no time."

Now Akuto grew flustered.

"What are you talking about? Something like that is hardly enough for that."

"H-how obscene can you get!?" shouted Junko in further confusion.

But Korone remained calm.

"I only meant he would tense up from nervousness. What did you think I meant?"

"Wait...!"

Akuto and Junko froze in place.

Korone continued speaking as if to kick them while they were down.

"If imagining that was enough to make you panic this much, you must be truly innocent, Junko-san. But do not worry. Akuto-san and I will break you in sexually."

That last comment brought the tension within the bus to its peak. Their classmates began muttering amongst themselves.

"Having a girl in a swimsuit on his lap isn't enough to get him hard..."

"And the two of them are going to break in the class rep..."

"Even for a demon king, he really doesn't know when to stop, does he?"

"I get the feeling this beach field trip is going to be sexually wild..."

Akuto felt he had to do something about this. He tried to stand up to speak to his classmates, but in his haste, he forgot that Korone was still on his lap. When she began to slip down, Korone clung even tighter to him. Akuto reflexively embraced her body. This process caused the strings of Korone's swimsuit to come undone. The small scraps of cloth were now hanging down from where they were held between Akuto and Korone's bodies. They now only just barely covered the important bits.

Standing up had resulted in nothing more than showing off Korone in a state that was even more erotic than if she were nude. Even so, Akuto managed to speak.

“Everyone, please quiet down. This is no big deal. It is nothing more than the usual small commotions. The class rep does not think anything of it either.”

After saying only that, Akuto sat down to fix Korone’s swimsuit, but he finally realized what he had actually said when he saw Junko’s expression and heard the muttering coming from the rest of the bus.

“I see. He does this kind of thing all the time, so he doesn’t see it as a big deal.”

“And the class rep was only jealous. It’s exhibitionism.”

Akuto fell silent because he had no idea what to say.

—Now I’ve done it... And I was hoping this would be an enjoyable field trip. Ah, why do I always do such foolish things?

He looked over at Junko, but she turned her head to look out the window and did not so much as budge.

He glanced to Hiroshi who sat beside him. He was not hoping the boy could help him out here. He was worried how Hiroshi had been so oddly silent despite usually causing the biggest commotion at times like this.

Hiroshi looked like he was lost in thought and was not even looking toward Akuto.

—He must be worried about that legend. What kind of field trip is this going to be?

The only person without a dark look on their face was Keena.

“A-chan, you shouldn’t tease girls too much.” It was unclear if she actually knew what was going on, but she offered a snack to Akuto. “These rice crackers have strictly selected rice and were hand-cooked one at a time.”

“Amazing.”

Akuto had no interest in the rice crackers, but he took one from Keena since he doubted anyone else would talk with him at the moment.

But then Korone swiped the rice cracker just before he put it in his mouth. She tossed it into her mouth and began munching on it.

—Wh-what is she trying to do?

Akuto could not help but feel an even deeper mystery in Korone’s odd action.

But then he was finally freed from that painful space.

“There’s the island,” someone said.

Akuto reflexively looked out the window.

In the middle of the cobalt blue ocean floated a large ring colored with a bit of green. It was a coral reef. In the center of that was a small island with white beaches along the edges. It looked like the ideal image of a tropical paradise.

"It's so pretty," muttered Junko, having forgotten all about her bad mood.

"It really is," agreed Akuto honestly.

He had grown up in such harsh circumstances that this was the first time he had ever seen a tropical island firsthand. It was quite moving for him.

On the other hand, when Hiroshi heard all this, he did not even bother looking out the window.

He instead muttered, "This island was made from a change in the earth's crust just under 100 years ago. The coral and forests were moved here. Everything here was made according to a plan. It's truly pathetic."

That comment dampened the mood in the bus.

"You don't have to say it like that," said Akuto quietly while being careful he did not sound angry.

Hiroshi shook his head as if he only just realized what he had said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Hiroshi may have apologized, but this actually made it harder for Akuto to speak to him.

Only Akuto's box was left in silence. The other classmates were filled with excitement.

Finally, the flying bus came to a stop on the island's beach. When the door opened, the students rushed to be the first out onto the beach while not listening Mitsuko-sensei's instructions.

Akuto stepped out onto the beach last. The scenery before him made a great contrast due to the bright sun. The waves broke calmly on the beach as the palm trees cast their shadows on the sand. He had seen the beach from above, but actually standing on it made it hit home that this was a different place from normal.

—Artificially made or not, this is a nice place.

With that thought, Akuto looked over toward Hiroshi, but the boy was still looking gloomy. It was not so much that Akuto found this unpleasant and more that he was disappointed they could not enjoy the scenery together. Keena was of course celebrating and Junko was smiling now, so it was sad that only Hiroshi could not share that feeling.

“Hey,” he started to say to Hiroshi, but he suddenly felt a malicious gaze.

Akuto reflexively looked over. He felt as if someone was watching him from the forest beyond the beach, but he could not see anyone there even when he strained his eyes.

—Did I imagine that? I suppose it isn’t like we would be unwelcome. The academy holds a beach field trip here every year.

Mitsuko-sensei then called to have the class gather.

“We will now move to the lodging facility. I have some advice for you, so listen up!”

In the end, Akuto was not able to talk to Hiroshi. Akuto and the others all moved to gather by Mitsuko-sensei.

They walked along a small path leading from the beach and toward a small three-story building. The outside was built to resemble a Japanese-style inn, but it had “Constant Magic Academy Lodging Facility” written on it. It was used for the beach field trip and training camps for different clubs. As they walked along the path, Akuto looked to the side, but he only saw a few tile-roofed houses a short distance away. The town seemed to be in that direction.

—Is that Hiroshi’s hometown?

However, Akuto found it difficult to ask Hiroshi directly. The fact that the

place looked completely deserted and that no one had been visible even when looking down on it from the flying bus made it even harder to ask.

When they entered the lodging facility, Mitsuko-sensei called Akuto over. He followed her curiously and it turned out a private room had been prepared for him.

"I thought everyone else was staying in two large rooms," complained Akuto.

"It can't be helped," said Mitsuko-sensei with a smile. "Just be glad you were able to come at all. And this means you can bring a girl in there with you. Good luck."

"Good luck with what...?" grumbled Akuto, but then he realized Mitsuko-sensei might know something about Hiroshi.

"By the way, sensei, I heard this is Hiroshi's hometown."

Mitsuko-sensei's expression changed to something that seemed to have some hidden meaning.

"It is. But it seems he does not like it much. It may be the rebellion that a lot of teenagers get."

"I do not understand why anyone would dislike their hometown."

"That's because you don't have a hometown. But others might not

understand how you feel about it, so...well...be careful of what you say."

Mitsuko-sensei smiled once more.

"Is that so?" said Akuto, but he did not actually understand what she meant.

"Well, since you're here, you should have some fun without worrying about everything so much," added Mitsuko-sensei with a wink.

Part 2

Each class held around 30 students and the first year went up to Class F, so a total of 180 students had come to the island. Despite the great number of people, the beach was plenty large for the students to have room to enjoy themselves.

Akuto spread out a sheet in the shade of some rocks a short distance from everyone else. He sat on that sheet while Keena lay beneath a parasol nearby.

Keena was wearing a two-piece swimsuit and was kicking her feet around in enjoyment while lying face down.

"Just sitting out here is fun," said Keena with a smile to Akuto.

Akuto had trouble deciding what expression to give in return. Keena had to strip down naked to use her invisibility magic, so he was actually fairly used to seeing her naked. However, he was still unsure where to look when she smiled at him while lying so nearby in that outfit that showed off her body lines. He put on a vague expression and Keena began tickling his exposed knee.

"Wah!"

"C'mon, you're supposed to be enjoying yourself. Or were you entranced by my swimsuit? Heh heh heh," laughed Keena.

He had heard more than enough of those jokes from Korone, but the difference in nuance when it came from Keena made him blush.

"Your face and body are a bit too childish for that," said Akuto to keep up appearances, but Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"What's wrong with that? It just means I have room to grow."

"I hope your mind grows up, too," said Akuto with a smile and Keena smiled back.

"Are you sure? Once I grow up, I'll have complete control over you."

She spoke mischievously, but Akuto felt his heart skip a beat for some reason. He felt more truth in it than if anyone else had said it.

—I really do feel like Keena is different from the other girls.

As he thought that, something suddenly leaned up against him from behind.

"Wh-what?"

He turned around in shock at the sudden feeling of skin. Korone was clinging to his back.

"Will you help me put on sunscreen?"

"What?" replied Akuto out of surprise at this sudden request.

Korone had changed swimsuits. For some reason, she was now wearing the school swimsuit used by the academy's middle school. It suited her body very well, but it seemed out of place here. It even had her name written on the chest.

Akuto was bewildered, but Korone lay down between him and Keena.

"Will you help me put on sunscreen?" she repeated.

She removed a bottle of sunscreen from her bag and handed it to Akuto.

"...Can L'Isle-Adams even get sunburns?"

"Look carefully at the package."

He looked at the sunscreen's package to find the words <L'Isle-Adam sunscreen. Keeps the harsh rays of the sun from peeling off your coating and keeps the salt out of your body when you enter the ocean!>

"So it's like car wax... But wait. You can't put this on with that swimsuit on," commented Akuto.

"That is not a problem," assured Korone. "While it does need to be applied to the skin below the swimsuit, you can stick your hand inside

the swimsuit. See? This swimsuit opens up down here. That makes it easy to stick your hand inside.”

Korone rolled over onto her back, pinched the fabric at the bottom of her belly, and lifted it up. The front of the swimsuit did indeed open, revealing a glimpse of beautiful skin below that was the color of white porcelain.

“No, wait a second. I-I can’t exactly stick my hand in there.”

Akuto naturally refused. He looked over to find a rare displeased look on Keena’s face.

—That’s right. Even she is starting to notice Korone is acting weird.

As Akuto remained confused, Korone suddenly sat up. She slid her swimsuit from her shoulders and then down to her waist.

“Wah!”

For an instant, Akuto saw Korone’s breasts. He frantically looked away, but Korone did not try to hide her body.

“It is so cute that you flinch back from simple nudity. I removed the swimsuit to make the sunscreen easier to apply. Now, please touch my breasts.”

Korone grabbed Akuto’s hand and began leading it toward her breast.

"W-wait a second..."

Akuto resisted. However, he could not knock Korone away or act at all violently, so he only averted his gaze and kept his arm stiffly in place.

"W-wait..."

Akuto was panicking, but then a he received a violent blow to the back of the head that, for once, he was thankful for.

"Wh-what are you doing, you pervert!?"

Akuto turned around to find Junko clenching her fist with a blush on her face. She wore a one piece swimsuit with so little decoration that it looked like a racing swimsuit.

"Th-thanks. You actually saved me this time."

Akuto moved away from Korone.

"Wh-why are you thanking me?"

Junko was confused by Akuto's odd reaction, but she still crouched down in front of Korone and fixed her swimsuit. Korone obediently let her do so.

"Honestly, what are you doing in front of Keena? ...Oh, right. I came to tell you that Miwa has gone to visit his parents," said Junko after putting Korone's swimsuit back on and standing up.

"I see. So that's why I didn't see him. He was acting oddly, so I hope he's okay."

"Mitsuko-sensei is trying to tread carefully. That may be why she asked me to tell you. Now, that was all I came here for, so I will be going."

Junko began to leave, but Akuto grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Wait. How about you swim with me?"

Akuto wanted to escape Korone for a while and he felt this would be a good opportunity to apologize for what happened on the bus.

"Eh...?" Junko smiled for an instant, but her expression quickly stiffened and she looked away. "I have no obligation to go along with that. How can you constantly act like some kind of lady-killer and then want to play when it is convenient to you?"

"If you are still mad about what happened on the bus, I apologize. I would like to argue that was due to Korone's comment, but I need to have more discretion in general. I have learned my lesson."

Akuto obediently bowed his head.

Junko looked like she was barely able to hold back a smile.

"Y-you leave me no choice. If you have learned your lesson, I can play with you for a little bit. It would be sad if you had no friends now that Miwa is gone."

"Thanks. I have never actually just had fun like this before. I would appreciate it if you could teach me what I am supposed to do," said Akuto with a serious expression.

His expression seemed to tell Junko that he really did mean it when he said that. She burst out laughing without thinking and then returned Akuto's serious expression.

"What is wrong with your personality? You just need to enjoy yourself. Wait, what are you making me say? This is not exactly my area of expertise either."

Keena had been watching this exchange in amusement, so Junko grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

"You come, too. You cannot stay out of the water after coming this far."

"Okay," agreed Keena energetically.

Before walking off, Keena looked over at Korone, but it seemed the L'Isle-Adam had decided to remain behind. She was sitting unmoving atop the sheet.

The three of them arrived at the edge of the beach, but stopped where the waves would wash up over their feet. It looked like they were waiting to see who would enter the ocean first.

"Entering the ocean first..."

"...seems like it takes serious resolution, doesn't it?"

Junko and Keena smiled at each other.

"Do they have some psychological opposition to getting wet?" wondered Akuto as he entered the ocean ahead of them.

Once he was waist-deep, he turned around to find Junko and Keena still stopped at the edge of the water.

"What are you doing? Aren't you coming?" he asked.

Keena's laughing voice replied, "A-chan, this tickles and is a lot of fun!"

Keena was pointing at her feet.

"The sand is being taken away by the waves, but it feels like it is shifting beneath my feet," commented Junko as her feet squirmed.

Seeing that, Akuto smiled and said, "I didn't expect to see you doing

something like this, Hattori-san."

"D-don't be silly. I am not acting childish!"

Junko shook her head and trudged into the ocean.

"Ah, Junko-chan! Wait!"

Keena followed her.

"And asking me to swim with you with that upset look..."

Junko approached Akuto, scooped up some seawater, and splashed it at his face.

"...is childish too!"

"Wah!"

Akuto shook his now-wet head and sent water spraying everywhere.

"I can't help it if I never got to have a water fight with anyone when I was a kid!"

Akuto splashed water back. It splashed down on Junko's head and left her soaking wet.

They exchanged a glance and began laughing.

"Ah! No fair having fun without me!"

Keena jumped at Akuto and Junko and knocked them both into the water.

"Wah!" shouted Akuto even as a certain feeling of completeness filled his chest for the first time.

—I never even imagined I would get to enjoy a normal school life like this. I'm glad I didn't die in some horrible accident or something.

"Why are you grinning like that!? That is completely inappropriate!" shouted Junko half-jokingly as she pushed Akuto down into the ocean.

Normally when Junko said something like that, it was followed by a legit punch, but she was surprisingly gentle this time. Akuto gave a halfhearted struggle, waited for the best timing, dove down, and scooped up Junko's legs. Junko let out a scream and sank into the ocean.

"Hey, hey," called Keena as they were playing.

Akuto and Junko stopped and looked over.

"Hey, what's this? They're all over the bottom of the ocean here!"

With a smile, Keena held out what she was holding.

It was a dark brown cylindrical object that was the perfect size to hold in the hand. Its surface was slimy and it was covered with a pattern similar to a python.

"I think that's a leopard sea cucumber. I've seen pictures of them before," said Akuto with a nod.

"I see. So it's a sea cucumber! It's so slimy and firm. It feels so funny!"

Keena smiled innocently as she began playing with the cylindrical creature by rubbing up and down with the hand holding it.

"Y-you probably shouldn't play with it like that...right?"

Akuto looked over at Junko with a bitter grin, but Junko backed up as if afraid of the sea cucumber in Keena's hand.

"K-keep that thing away from me."

"Hattori-san, do you not like this kind of thing?" asked Akuto and she nodded without looking over at him.

"Y-yes. I do not like slimy things like frogs."

Junko's gaze was fixed on the sea cucumber. She was likely afraid Keena would throw it at her. Picking up on that, Akuto warned Keena.

"C'mon, Hattori-san says she doesn't like it, so don't hold it out toward her like that."

Keena obediently nodded.

"Okay!"

But in that instant, Keena seemed to tighten her grip. Something white shot out the end of the sea cucumber's body. It looked like strings of sticky liquid.

—Oh, come to think of it, I've heard that some of a sea cucumbers' insides can easily burst out. That must be what happened.

Akuto was oddly impressed by this, but when he saw where those insides had gone, he quickly realized this was hardly the time.

That white sticky stuff splattered all over Junko's face.

"Eeee! Kyaaahh!"

Junko screamed and leapt up and out of the water with the ninja strength that she had not used while they were playing. She made it back to the beach in almost no time.

"See? You shouldn't do that," warned Akuto.

"Sorry," apologized Keena obediently as she toyed with the sea cucumber in her hand.

"I'll go after her," said Akuto before returning to the beach.

He followed Junko's footsteps and found her quite quickly. She was hiding behind some rocks and desperately trying to remove the white stuff stuck to her face.

"Hattori-san, are you okay?"

Akuto walked over and Junko rushed over to him with tears in her eyes.

"P-please get this off! It's so sticky!"

With Junko embracing him, her face was extremely close by. Her features gave a rather sharp impression, but it was now distorted by the shock and the sticky white stuff.

"I-I will. Don't move."

Akuto carefully moved his fingers across her face. It seemed to be some sort of white fiber stuck on her face. He diligently pinched them between his fingers and removed them one at a time.

"This shouldn't be poisonous, so you'll be fine. Good, your face is not swollen," said Akuto to put her at ease.

"R-really? At any rate, hurry up and get it all off."

Junko must have lost control of herself because she was frantically clinging to him. This made it difficult to move his hand across her face, so he touched her arm with his other hand.

"Hey, I know you are scared, but move away just a bit."

Junko's face visibly reddened and she slowly removed her arms from Akuto's body.

"D-do not make any ridiculous misunderstandings about this."

"I know. You were only scared, right?"



"Th-that is not it, you idiot! I would never rely on you even if I was afraid."

"I know that too, but just calm down. The way you were while playing in the ocean was exactly how you were when I first met you. It feels like you put too much effort into being perfect at school," said Akuto without really thinking.

Junko began fidgeting and looked toward him accusingly.

"Why would you say that...? E-embarrassing me like that makes it hard to stay sitting here. I-I only showed that side of myself to you. And I was feeling relieved because of all the strange things you usually do."

"I try to always act normally. It is those around me that do the strange things."

"Then maybe you were just strange from the beginning."

"In that case, there's nothing I can do... Oh, that's the last of it."

Akuto flicked the last strand of sea cucumber innards from his finger.

Junko looked somehow disappointed. Despite trying to move away earlier, she stayed put and looked up at Akuto.

"What is it?" he asked.

Junko shook her head as if she had been seen doing something wrong.

"N-no... I was just thinking that I had not thanked you..."

"This isn't worth thanking me over. And this was Keena's fault."

"I-if Keena did it, then it is not your responsibility."

"True, but I get the feeling that I'm her supervisor or something."

Akuto smiled, but Junko's expression was unexpectedly serious.

"Y-you refer to Keena by her given name. I-I am also your friend, so why do you refer to me by my family name?"

When she finished speaking, Junko lowered her face.

"W-well, you take everything so seriously, Hattori-san, so it just seemed appropriate..."

Akuto grew flustered due to his confusion and some intense feeling filling his chest.

—But if Hattori-san is willing to show me this side of her, then maybe I need a new way to refer to her. That's only polite.

"Junko...-san."

After he spoke that with some degree of embarrassment, Junko raised her head and began mumbling something.

"A-Aku-..."

As soon as she got that far, something happened so suddenly that Akuto did not immediately realize what it was. And it had to have been even more sudden for Junko.

At some point, Korone had snuck up behind Junko. With her usual expressionless look, Korone had grabbed the shoulders of Junko's swimsuit and pulled it down to her belly.

"Eh?"

"What?"

Both Akuto and Junko were at a loss for words. They were unable to move for a short while. For that reason, Junko's defenseless and bare upper body was exposed before Akuto's eyes for a full three seconds.

"Ah..."

"H-..."

Junko finally caught on to what had happened.

"Hyaaaahh!"

She screamed and curled up her body.

"W-wait! What are you doing, Korone!?" asked Akuto, but Korone

replied calmly.

"I thought I would help create a decent mood."

"Don't lie. Why would you do something so cruel?" criticized Akuto, but it seemed Korone did not understand. Akuto could not help but grow angry. "Even if you are my observer, this is not acceptable. In fact, an observer shouldn't be a nuisance to those around me. You aren't actually our classmate, so you should not be causing problems like this."

"You are right. I am not your classmate. Our relationship is one of observer and observation target," said Korone plainly.

However, the plainness of her tone was somehow different.

—Huh?

And Akuto picked up on this oddity. Unlike normal, this plainness actually held emotion.

"It may have been a mistake to try to interfere with you. However, this was only my inability to do so properly. I did not intend any harm," muttered Korone quietly.

"W-wait..."

This change made Akuto panic, but Korone only continued speaking in her plain yet somehow sad voice.

"Please do not worry about me. This was my fault. The one thing I do not want you to forget is that I wish to remain by your side."

"Eh? Eh?"

This sudden confession confused Akuto. Korone turned around and walked off before he could say anything more.

Junko was also confused by Korone's attitude. After fixing her swimsuit and quickly getting over her poisonous mood, she watched Korone leave.

"Wh-what is with Korone?"

"I don't know..."

"S-something definitely is not right. Especially that last comment. Is it possible that Korone lov-..."

Junko's confused words were drowned out by an even louder voice.

"A-chan! This is so weird! There are a whole bunch of sea cucumbers!"

Keena came splashing up from the ocean.

Junko jumped in shock when she heard the term "sea cucumbers".

“Wah! Keena, don’t bring the sea cucumbers over here!” shouted Akuto, but Keena gave no reply.

Shortly thereafter, a sea cucumber of a different color than the previous one flew over the rock behind Akuto and Junko. Junko screamed and Akuto frantically worked to knock away the sea cucumber while calming Junko. In the end, their conversation was never continued. They later asked Keena why she had done that.

“That sea cucumber was a different color, so I thought Junko-chan might be fine with it!” she had replied cheerfully.

Part 3

While his classmates had fun on the beach, Hiroshi visited his hometown.

He took the small road alongside the academy's lodging facility to enter the village. Only a few small tile-roofed houses lined the road, so it did not have the unity of a normal village. However, the effort put into the roads connecting the houses showed how much the villagers loved the land.

Oddly, the village seemed completely deserted as Hiroshi trudged home, but he had a hunch as to why.

—This is why I didn't want to do this. Honestly, I can't believe an entire village is refusing to come out for fear of the demon king.

With that bitter thought, Hiroshi tried to open the door to his home. It was locked which irritated him. The village had a habit of never locking its doors.

"Mom, I'm home," he called out.

Only then was the door unlocked from the inside.

"Welcome home. You must be exhausted."

His mother welcomed him in with a cheerful voice, so he could not

remain in an entirely bad mood.

"Good to see you, mom."

He may have had his issues, but family was family. Just entering the front door made him feel at home.

His father and younger sister came out too. For some reason, his parents began putting their shoes on at the entrance.

"What is it? Are you going somewhere?"

"You are going too. A party is being held for you at the public hall," said his father in a tone that said, "Don't ask the obvious."

"W-wait. At least let me get some tea first."

"I said a party is being held for you. And we cannot leave the front door open. Now hurry."

His father quickly stood up and left.

His mother must have felt there was no helping it because she gave Hiroshi a bitter grin.

"Nothing is going to change that about him."

Hiroshi gave no reply, but she still turned and followed his father. His little sister Yukiko then pulled on his pants. She was a fair bit younger than him, so she was only 11.

"Welcome back, onii-chan."

"Thanks."

"Everyone started preparing to welcome you back when they heard you were coming."

"I see. That's amazing," he replied halfheartedly.

However, Hiroshi's heart was heavy. The village had no other youth, so this welcome party would only be for the benefit of the villagers. As expected, the public hall was filled with old men whose faces were reddened by alcohol.

"Oh, the future hero has returned."

"With you here, the village is sure to be safe."

The old villagers called out to him jokingly. A banner was hanging down from the ceiling.

It read <Welcome, future priest>

It took all of Hiroshi's effort not to look displeased. He was given food and drink, but he paid no attention to what any of it tasted like. He chatted with a halfhearted forced smile, but the others quickly lost interest in him and began discussing pointless topics.

—In the end, they're only treating me kindly because I might become a priest one day.

Hiroshi's idea was not that farfetched. The villagers were being quite blatant about it. They had jokingly asked him to do something for the village ever since he had decided to enroll in Constant Magic Academy. Some had even secretly asked him for direct help with their business because they were having difficulties. Even someone like Hiroshi did not enjoy seeing that unpleasant side of things.

The party showed no sign of ending, so Hiroshi claimed he had to leave for something related to school. In the end, he never managed to just relax at home. His parents must have been enjoying the socialization because they did not see him off. Only his sister Yukiko came with him.

"Hey, is it true there's a demon king at your school?" asked Yukiko as soon as they left the public hall.

"Not of the kind everyone thinks there is," denied Hiroshi.

"Everyone's scared. They say there's some kind of legend."

"That's a lie."

Hiroshi circled around to the back of the public hall in search of somewhere to sit and talk with Yukiko. Some bricks were piled up near the window to make a flower bed which created the perfect spot. He sat there next to Yukiko.

"But at night, there are strange sounds, strange people walking on the roads, and a ghost's voice in the distance," said Yukiko with a perfectly serious expression.

Hiroshi doubted she was lying, but he assumed it was a childish misunderstanding.

"It only sounds that way because you're afraid."

"So there really is no demon king? I'm too old to be afraid of ghosts, but the grownups all say the demon king really exists."

"There is someone who is called a demon king."

From what Yukiko had said, it seemed rumors of Akuto had spread quite far. It would have been difficult to say the demon king did not exist at all.

"But he is not the kind of demon king everyone is afraid of."

"What do you mean?"

"He isn't a scary person. He's my friend."

"Really? Amazing, onii-chan!"

Yukiko looked up at Hiroshi with a look of respect.

"So you don't have to be scared, right?"

"Right!" said Yukiko with a nod.

At that point, they heard a voice from behind them. It came from the back wall of the public hall. The back had been made into a smoking area, so the villagers who smoked had gathered there.

"Miwa's son really is a weakling."

"Yeah. From the look of him, his grades at school probably aren't all that great. Magic is about the effort you put into it after all."

Hiroshi could hear the voices clearly from outside, but the speakers did not seem to realize it. If they continued speaking, the topic would clearly turn in a very bad direction, but moving would alert the speakers of their presence.

"But the village's future is dark if he doesn't become a priest."

"Having just one priest is supposed to give you a whole lot more aid money. And he can become a priest as long as he graduates from that school, right? A high priest is a different matter of course."

"But there's that rumor about a demon king at the school."

"Yeah, apparently it's true. I hear he's caused all sorts of trouble at the school. Some say he's already taken control of the place. I don't believe in the island's legend, but a demon king can easily exist if you just think of one as someone with powerful magic who rebels."

"True, and the students of that school have always been a wild bunch. I heard their student council president destroyed a group of knights."

"I can't believe we let them into the village. I'm starting to think we really do need a hero."

"The demonic beast and the hero are nothing but lies, but Miwa really does believe his son is the hero. Ah ha ha ha."

"Ee hee hee hee hee. Impossible. He's always been a complete coward. He's the only one who grew up here yet didn't learn to swim. He'd always start crying if anything happened and would even piss himself if you scared him."

When he heard those laughing voices, Hiroshi felt as if something heavy had been embedded in his gut. His face twisted into what did not quite look like anger or shame. He felt tears trying to work their way out, but he had to resist while his little sister was watching.

After he was sure the two speakers had finished smoking and left, Hiroshi stood up.

"Onii-chan..." said Yukiko worriedly.

Hiroshi showed her a smile and said, "The villagers don't understand the truth. And that's why you need to understand the truth, Yukiko."

Hiroshi and Yukiko walked home in silence. Yukiko looked worried, but Hiroshi was forced to part ways at the house because he had to return to the lodging facility.

On his way back from his house, a few tears managed to escape, so he stopped to wipe them off.

As he did, he thought he heard a distant roar. He turned around and realized a low rumbling was coming from the mountain in the middle of the island.

Hiroshi was actually very knowledgeable about the island's legend. A lake was located at the foot of the mountain and that lake marked the exact center of the island. The demonic beast was said to come from there and the hero's supposed weapon was located quite nearby. However, he also knew better than anyone that both were tricks. That roar he had heard was a fake.

—If that demonic beast actually exists, I hope it really does destroy the village. Not that there's any chance it does exist.

That was what Hiroshi truly thought.

Part 4

Akuto had suddenly realized someone was watching him. He had noticed it in a thicket while walking back from the beach and he had noticed it out the window while arranging his luggage in his room at the lodging facility. He had felt a gaze that was clearly not from anyone he knew.

He felt as if his sense for this had grown sharper recently. It was possible his ability to sense mana had increased. If so, it may not have been his imagination that some unknown person was monitoring him.

—Maybe I should figure out who it is before this causes a problem for anyone else.

Akuto intentionally walked out of the front of the lodging facility before dinner. When he felt the gaze once more, he made up of his mind. During the free time after dinner, he took his shoes back to his room so he could sneak out the window. When he opened the window to leave, he found Korone's face. She was standing outside the window.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. There is simply something that is bothering me," said Korone.

"Bothering you?"

"Someone is poking around your surroundings."

Korone had been acting oddly lately, but Akuto knew he could trust her about this sort of thing.

"That was bothering me too. I was thinking of pursuing them."

"I hope there is no danger, but if you are going, then I will go with you," agreed Korone.

Chapter 3: A Surprise in a Dark Forest?

Part 1

"If you can sense this person's gaze, your mana detection ability must be improving," said Korone.

That matched what Akuto had been thinking.

"Does that mean I can detect the mana in people's bodies?"

"Yes. Humans can detect and remember the subtle differences in the mana pattern within an individual. That allows one to detect a hidden individual using the sense commonly referred to as intuition."

"Then this feeling that someone is watching me is real...?"

"My sensors have detected it as well. It is not your imagination."

Korone pointed to the sensor in her hand. What looked like a pocket watch displayed a glowing radar screen.

"This is a mana detection radar. It can trace movements in mana. However, a skilled magic user can hide the mana reactions caused by the changes in their internal mana and it has difficulty detecting those with only a small amount of mana. It may be of little use in most situations, but it seems to be helpful here."

A small dot of light was displayed over the map on the screen Korone showed him. The dot was located very nearby.

"So we just have to pursue this dot."

Akuto began walking in the direction of the dot. He was forced to brush the branches and underbrush aside to make a path, but he could still make forward progress. However, it was dark in the forest at night, so he borrowed a light from Korone and shined it forward. Once he did, the thicket moved and produced a rustling sound. Something was definitely there.

"There they are."

Akuto began running. The movement in the thicket began moving away. It moved surprisingly fast. Akuto's footing was uncertain and he did not know the land, but he still ran as quickly as he could. However, he eventually lost sight of the movement.

"Let me see the radar."

Akuto started to grow out of breath as Korone reached her hand forward from behind.

She showed him the radar screen and said, "This is strange. I can no longer detect the person."

"What?"

Akuto looked closely at the screen and he could tell something was

wrong. Not only was the dot gone, but the entire map was no longer being displayed.

"Did it break?" he asked, but Korone shook her head.

"The mana is being disturbed. It is interfering with any device that uses mana."

"Are you okay?"

"I have switched over to a mode where I do not exchange mana with the external world."

"That's good. ...But this means we lost sight of them."

"So it seems. Our exact location is also unclear."

"So we're lost?"

"No. I memorized the landscape on our way here. As long as you are with me, you will be fine."

"Then let's head back."

Akuto gave up on tracking this person.

However, he then felt an eerie chill on the back of his neck.

He immediately spun around, but found nothing.

It seemed Korone had sensed it as well. She brought a hand to her ear as if listening for some sound.

"What is it?"

"I heard someone fleeing. Let us pursue this person a bit further. I can see in the dark, so I can track this person by sight to a certain extent."

Without waiting for agreement, Korone suddenly ran off.

"Eh? Wait!"

Akuto frantically tried to pursue, but Korone only continued to accelerate.

Akuto had nothing but a single light in that dark forest. He gradually trailed further and further behind Korone and had no idea where he was.

Finally, he gave up on running.

"What a pain... But Korone should return after a while."

Akuto found a random tree, sat down, and leaned up against it.

This was the first time Korone had run off and left him behind. He had thought she was acting more normally here, but it seemed she was still acting oddly.

—But without Korone, I think I would have a lot of trouble. Korone has become almost necessary for me...

Akuto thought vaguely about that.

And then he heard a rustling from a nearby thicket.

Part 2

Shortly before Akuto and Korone began pursuing this mysterious person, Fujiko was below Constant Magic Academy with Peterhausen. However, she was not having a great struggle.



"That is right! Akuto-sama shall be an absolute ruler and I shall be his queen! Those who oppose us shall be thrown into a pool of poisonous snakes and the two of us shall enjoy dinner and sip on blood wine while watching it all! That is my dream!"

Fujiko spoke excitedly and Peterhausen listened in satisfaction.

"At night, all the beautiful women of the country shall be gathered, stripped naked, and made to seduce Akuto-sama! But he shall of course have eyes for no one but me! He shall take only me to bed with him! As the women cry out in jealousy, he shall show me off to them as we join together as one! Those gazes of jealousy, defeat, and envy shall make me all the more beautiful!"

As she spoke, Fujiko's body shook with great emotion.

"You are quite the evil woman. You must work to achieve that dream," said Peterhausen with a powerful nod.

"I will! I must give my all for Akuto-sama and work to join all the black magicians under my rule!"

Fujiko clenched her fist while sipping on black tea.

Fujiko had been forced to be Peterhausen's conversational partner this entire time, but her fear had waned after spending several hours with him. Once the fear was gone, she returned to her normal self whose excellent speaking skills allowed her to deceive and threaten people. It had not been difficult to get along with Peterhausen. And this was not

entirely due to her speaking skills. Fujiko had a terrible personality and Peterhausen liked that about her.

"I need you to work very hard at this. My master cannot lose his ambitions," uttered Peterhausen like an old prime minister complaining about his attempts to bring up a young general.

"I think the real problem is his goodness, not a lack of ambition," replied someone other than Fujiko.

Peterhausen and Fujiko both turned around at the same moment.

A short girl had walked into the underground palace. She wore a stylish hat and an androgynous mischievous face could be seen below it.

She was Lily Shiraishi, the school's student council president.

"Oh, it is the boy from the other day," commented Peterhausen with a snort.

Veins bulged out on Lily's forehead and her expression grew grim, but she managed to avoid growing violent. She showed no sign of hiding her displeasure, but she kept her arms folded as she stood before Peterhausen.

"Don't call me boy. Whether I look it or not, I am a lady. And I have come with something you might want to hear."

"Then out with it."

"Oh, how self-important. Well, whatever. The student council...no, the entire academy has decided how to deal with you all."

Peterhausen looked indifferent, but Fujiko's body stiffened. She knew very well that Peterhausen's presence at the school caused all sorts of problems.

"Who did the academy side with?"

The academy had previously sided with the moderates and given Akuto his freedom as he was not presently a demon king. However, it would not be surprising if Peterhausen's presence would motivate them to now side with the hardliners.

"To sum it up, nothing changes. The academy will protect Sai Akuto as one of its students. Peterhausen is not an illegal presence. Of course, that's probably just because no one bothered to make any laws about it."

Lily's words put Fujiko at ease. Lily was the student council president and she already worked for the government. Fujiko was extremely grateful that this did not need to develop into a confrontation.

"Thank goodness. You were right. I was glad to hear that."

"That's not all. I wouldn't have come all this way to report that the status quo has been maintained. I am fed up with the moderates...that is, the main faction of the government I belong to."

Lily grinned. She had a boyish face, but when she grinned like that, it held enough intensity to send a chill down Fujiko's spine.

"You are fed up with them?"

"It seems those old men are having a L'Isle-Adam try to seduce Sai Akuto."

Lily's comment shocked Fujiko.

"Seduce...Akuto-sama...?"

"That goes against my principles. L'Isle-Adams can't disobey their orders. And on top of that, she will be dismissed if she fails this mission. So how will this turn out for that unsociable girl? There is no man who has not given into a L'Isle Adam's seduction. Plenty of politicians have fallen into scandals over it in the past."

"I-I cannot allow this!"

"I thought not. I don't want to grow up into the kind of adult who can allow this kind of thing to happen. And once I start hating them, it's hard to stop. That is what I thought you might want to hear. I will be personally taking part in this incident."

"What do you mean?" asked Fujiko.

She could sense no intention to help Akuto in Lily's intensity.

"I am saying I will not handle this like the moderates are. Nor am I going to do nothing about the hardliners like Sai Akuto is. I have obtained some information regarding the central group that is trying to start a war. No matter what Akuto may say, I will kill them!"

Lily brought her fists together in front of her chest.

"The central group that is trying to start a war?"

"CIMO 8."

"Is that their name?"

"They are a group of eight agents from the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office. I have information saying they have already begun to take action. They are experts at intelligence gathering and anti-magic combat."

"That...certainly is worth hearing."

It seemed Lily had gone out of her way to tell them this. And on top of that, she had said she would crush this enemy. To Fujiko, it seemed the girl was doing it out of consideration for Akuto regardless of what she might say.

However...

"But I will be your enemy," said Lily.

"Eh?"

"If he becomes a tool used by black magicians or he takes any action that would disturb our society, I will crush him and those working with him regardless of what the moderates say. That is what I mean. You need to be especially careful, Etou Fujiko-kun," said Lily with a cruel expression.

Fujiko put herself on guard, but she knew her power was not enough to handle the student council president. Strategies that left the fighting to Peterhausen raced through her mind.

But Lily's serious expression collapsed soon thereafter.

"It wouldn't be any fun with you. Tell him that I still haven't shown him everything I am capable of."

"...Understood," agreed Fujiko.

With her threats made, Lily left.

Fujiko sank to the floor and Peterhausen laughed.

"Quite the energetic girl."

"I am the type that fights using my intellect," complained Fujiko.

"If you can keep up your strong front, that can be an excellent strength. But be as it may, if you are the type that fights with your intellect, shouldn't you pass this information on to my master?" asked Peterhausen.

Fujiko gasped and pulled out her student handbook that could act as a communications device.

She opened a telepathic conversation with Akuto, but it refused to connect.

"The mana is being blocked?"

Fujiko looked over toward Peterhausen for an explanation.

"That talk of intelligence gathering and anti-magic combat experts bothers me. Mana jamming is one of their basic techniques."

"But if the entire area of the beach field trip was being jammed, it would have caused enough of a commotion for the academy's teachers to have heard about it. Does that mean Akuto-sama alone is in danger?"

Fujiko now tried to open telepathic communications with Keena.

Keena answered after a few rings.

<Oh, it's senpai. Hi!>

"No, not hi! For one thing, you tricked me into looking after Peterhausen! ...But I can discuss that with you later! Do you know where Akuto-sama is?"

<Eh? A-chan? Come to think of it, I haven't seen him.>

"Okay, listen carefully..."

Part 3

When Akuto heard the sound from the thicket, he got up from the tree and took a defensive stance.

He needed to be able to react to whatever came out of that thicket.

But...

"A-chan, I finally found you."

It was Keena who walked unsteadily out of the thicket.

"Keena?"

"Senpai contacted me, so I ran after you to pass on the message."

Keena sat flatly on the ground in front of Akuto.

"Sorry. It seems someone was monitoring me, so I tried to pursue them with Korone. But Korone went on ahead..."

"I see. When I went to your room, I saw you entering the woods, so I followed your light," said Keena with a smile.

Akuto started to feel silly for being so nervous.

"So what did senpai want?"

Keena tilted her head.

"Huh? Um... There were a few things..."

Keena looked up as if she were trying to remember something. This seemed too slow even for Keena.

"Are you okay?" asked Akuto as he peered at her face.

Keena's face was red and her breathing was heavy.

"Yeah... I just ran and flew a bit... so I'm out of breath... Oh, right! One thing was some villains called Simon 5's targeting you!" exclaimed Keena while bringing a fist down on her palm.

"That sounds like a mix between a folk duo and a chorus of five brothers..."

"Well, I might have the name wrong, but these villains are targeting you. I hear they're good at killing magicians. It's so scary."

Keena's voice held no tension at all, so Akuto was unsure how to respond. However, it was still dangerous news.

—Is that why the mana devices malfunctioned?

However, he knew asking Keena that would be pointless, so he kept the thought to himself.

"What else?"

"U-um... She said the student council president told her that. Also... what else was it?"

Keena was acting too stupid. And her face was horribly red.

"Ugh, it's just too hot. But don't worry. I brought this with me so we could drink it together."

Keena pulled out a water bottle hanging from her waist. She took the lid and poured a thick white liquid into it.

"What is that?"

"Heh heh heh... This is a new drink I created! I drank some when I got thirsty running here, so I know it's good!"

Keena held the water bottle lid up high.

"Okay, so it's good...but what is it?"

"It's rice juice!" Keena puffed her chest out proudly and drank the contents of the lid in one gulp. "It's so good!"

"...Good? ...No, wait."

Akuto had a very bad feeling.

"You drink some too, A-chan! I've been trying to come up with a way to make rice juice for so long and I finally perfected it! So I brought it on this field trip." Keena refilled the lid and held it out toward Akuto. "I dissolved cooked and crushed rice into water and then – this is the important part – I put koji and yogurt in before sealing it in a bottle and letting it sit! After about two days, it smelled really good and the top layer of the juice was delicious! I then made another discovery! If you filter off that top layer and put it in the refrigerator, it turns into a carbonated cider!"

Keena continued on and on with her lecture on how to make the "rice juice".

—Oh... I was right...

Akuto took the lid and sniffed it. It did smell good, but it was a very adult aroma.

"Keena, this has alcohol in it," said Akuto, but Keena was no longer listening.

Her face was red and she was swaying back and forth.

"Eh heh heh heh heh heh... There are so many A-chans..."

—Well, she did drink a whole bunch after running.

"C'mon, don't drink any more. Come here and take a rest."

Akuto had Keena sit next to the tree he had been leaning up against before. He grabbed her shoulders to adjust her position, but Keena suddenly pulled him toward her while he was crouched down.

"Wah!"

"Eh heh heh heh... A-chan, this feels good..."

Keena was rubbing her cheek up against him. His crouching posture was uncomfortable, so he ended up sitting next to her. Keena embraced Akuto's head and brought her entire body into his arms.

"Onyo nyo nyo nyo nyo..."

Keena began making an odd slurring noise while softly biting at Akuto's ear.

"H-hey! That tickles..."

"Eh? What's wrong with it? Doing this feels somehow nostalgic..."

—Nostalgic? Come to think of it, I did think I might have met her a long time ago.

Akuto thought back to his past. When he was leaving the orphanage, a girl just arriving had cried so much he had bought her the kind of hair decoration adults wore using the money he had been given. The bird design had been identical to the one Keena wore in her hair now, but Keena did not seem to remember it.

“Maybe we really did meet a long time ago,” he said.

“Maybe so. Maybe we were destined to meet. Eh heh heh heh heh...”

Keena gave a sloppy smile, but this answer was not the serious one Akuto had been hoping for.

—But I have no real reason to be so fixated over this. Why am I so fixated over it?

With that thought, Akuto suddenly remembered what Junko had said earlier that day.

“You refer to Keena by her given name. I am also your friend, so why do you refer to me by my family name?”

He had thought it was due to how properly Junko acted, but on second thought, Junko was not that difficult to speak with. It may have been that

Keena was simply that much easier to relax around.

—In that case... Did I fall for Keena long, long ago?

Once his thoughts turned in that direction, he could not remain calm.

Keena's body was giving off the scent of a slightly burnt confectionery thanks to the "rice juice". That defenseless body leaning up against him was warm and soft like a freshly pounded rice cake.

—To use that comparison, I must have been infected by Keena's rice obsession.

Akuto shook his head in an attempt to calm down. He looked over at Keena's calm face. He thought she must have fallen asleep, but she opened her eyes wide and looked back at him.

—Wah!

He silently shouted out in surprise, but somehow managed to not avert his gaze. He felt averting his gaze would be rude to Keena.



She smiled gently and Akuto felt as if all of his worries from the day were melting away. As he peered into her eyes, he felt as if he was being unsteadily drawn in toward them.

"A-chan, you're trying to kiss me. You can't do that," said Keena suddenly.

Akuto panicked because it felt like she had seen right through to his heart.

"D-don't be ridiculous."

"Hm, that's right. You mustn't do indecent things. But on the cheek is fine," said Keena as she held out her reddened cheek.

—That's right. That wouldn't violate my doctrines... No, wait. I can't do that. But...

Akuto felt his heart relaxing more than he felt any kind of sexual desire. This felt like the family he had always desired. Only in Keena did he feel this familial love that he had always desired yet rejected.

—If it's just showing a familial sort of love, there shouldn't be a problem.

Akuto brought his face toward Keena.

"Yay!" shouted Keena happily as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

And Akuto gave Keena's cheek...

"Take this!"

A tremendous impact slammed into Akuto. He collapsed to the ground

head first.

"Hey!" He got up and turned around to find Korone standing next to Keena. "Y-you don't have to suddenly hit me."

But Akuto's complaint was met only with Korone's usual expressionless look.

"You just happened to be in the way while I was taking evasive actions."

"You clearly said 'take this'!"

Korone ignored that point.

"As I said, I was taking evasive actions. We do not have time for an argument."

"What are you talking about?"

Akuto took a step forward to see if she was telling the truth.

And then he was afflicted by a sharp headache.

And an instant after that feeling filled him with confusion...

He heard a loud, dry sound.

At almost the exact same moment, Korone's body slowly began to collapse.

"Korone!"

Akuto tried to run over to her, but she held up a hand to stop him while on her knees.

"Please stay back. I am fine. I was only shot."

—Shot?

Part 4

He suddenly realized he recognized the sound from before. It was the sound of an incantation gun being fired.

"Is it the person we were pursuing?" asked Akuto.

Korone nodded.

She was made to be sturdy, so no outward change could be seen. However, Akuto had no way of knowing how much internal damage had been done.

He crouched down, held his breath, and searched for a nearby presence, but he could not detect anyone hiding in the darkness.

"I have an idea who the enemy is," said Korone.

"Who is it?" asked Akuto, but Korone shook her head.

"I cannot say."

"Why not?"

"I cannot tell you that either. However, there is something this situation forces me to ask."

"Eh?" said Akuto in confusion.

Korone stared at him with a serious look in her eyes and said, "What are your feelings for Keena-san?"

This was a sudden question, but Akuto realized Korone's eyes contained a look different from normal. It felt like some emotion was showing through her normal expressionlessness.

"Wh-why are you asking that now?"

"It is important. It determines whether I can fight this enemy for you or not."

"What do you mean?"

"I need not explain any more," said Korone in a serious tone.

—Could it be...?

No matter how obtuse Akuto could be, he was beginning to realize what was causing Korone's odd behavior. It was possible his exchange with Keena while she was drunk had finally led him to think about the existence of "love".

—Could it be that Korone loves me and is trying to oppose the government for that reason? And is she determining my feelings now?

But wait. What am I supposed to do in that case? I need Korone with me, but that sort of relationship is out of the question.

"H-hey... Are you mad that Keena was...clinging to me a bit there?" asked Akuto, hoping Keena's intoxication would make a decent excuse.

"I am not angry. However, this is inconvenient for me," replied Korone.

—Come to think of it, Korone has started referring to herself differently. [1] I don't think L'Isle-Adams refer to themselves like that often, but maybe they do once their sense of self begins to form. That must be it. But then...

"Um, sorry, but I don't think things will ever be 'convenient' for you in that way." Akuto was flustered, but he felt the need to state his position clearly. "But that is not because I dislike you or do not need you. I do need you and will continue to need you. I just think what you want would be insincere."

After Akuto finished speaking, Korone stood perfectly still.

"I am sad to hear that."

Korone hung her head down. Her expression was clearly one of sorrow.

Akuto felt a tightness in his chest. He had never felt this feeling before.

Korone spoke in a low, pained voice that sounded like she had to

squeeze it out.

"I have determined that I have failed. That means I may no longer be able to remain here."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"I cannot say. However, this may be the last time we see each other. In case it is, I must say farewell."

"Wait a second!"

Akuto had a very bad feeling, so he reached out toward Korone.

However, she only shook her head.

"I will do my very best, but you should not get your hopes up. Thank you for everything. Farewell."

Korone pulled a doorknob-like object out of her bag and held it out. A hole opened in space as if the air had been split open to produce a door. Korone began to climb into it. This was a portable transport magic circle.

"Please wait. How can you leave without explaining anything? I need you..."

Half of Korone's body had now entered this strange space. She turned

around, gave a sorrowful smile and waved at Akuto.

“Farewell.”

She then disappeared into the door as if shaking free of something.

The door disappeared into thin air, leaving behind nothing but the dark forest. However, Akuto felt as if a tear shed by Korone had been left behind.

Nevertheless, he did not have time to stand around. He heard a rustling sound form a fairly distant thicket.

—Is that the person who shot Korone!?

Akuto looked toward that thicket. It was moving as if someone was trying to flee. They must have been able to shoot Korone, but had been unable to find a way of escaping unnoticed.

—I might be able to stop them from escaping!

Akuto's history with magic contained failure after failure, but he had no choice but to use it here. He focused and reached out his hand to telekinetically stop everything in that thicket.

However, he had forgotten about the mana abnormality and the headache he had felt just before Korone was shot. He should have been able to guess that someone was preventing magic from being used

properly in the area, but he was not thinking rationally.

—Oh, no!

Akuto quickly realized he could not control the power surging in his hand, but it was already too late. An unexpected explosion assaulted the thicket and shook the area around it. A great flash of light lit up the darkness. It had to have been visible from a great distance.

“Kyaaaah!”

A voice rang out from the thicket. To Akuto’s surprise it sounded like a child.

“Eh?”

He frantically ran over to the thicket and shined his light in.

He found a girl of about ten.

“A-are you okay?”

Akuto helped the girl up. Fortunately, she was not injured. She was breathing and had only been knocked unconscious. Akuto had tried to lower the output of his magic as soon as he realized he had failed, and that seemed to have paid off. The girl was also lucky she had not been directly struck by the explosion. However, the roar of the blast had been enough of an impact to knock her out.

Akuto picked up the girl and checked her face.

—Ah...

He recognized her features. They were almost identical to Hiroshi's. Hiroshi's features were childish to begin with, so there was no mistaking it.

—But this girl can't have been the one to shoot that incantation gun.

Akuto remained on his guard, but he could sense no presence in the surrounding area. The headache had also gone.

"Keena, are you okay?" asked Akuto as he turned around.

"Yeah. But A-chan..." said Keena uncertainly as she stood up. "Korone-chan left, didn't she?"

"You heard that?"

"I fell asleep, so I only heard the last bit. A-and I-I'm sorry. I just remembered what senpai told me," said Keena apologetically now that she had sobered up a good bit.

"What did you remember?"

"Korone-chan was, um...ordered to seduce you. If she failed, she was going to be fired as your observer.."

—What!?

Akuto was at a loss for words.

He was fed up with people trying to influence him by seducing him, but he was also filled with disgust at Korone's superiors for making her feel so sad by doing this to her. He also felt regret over the fact that he might have been able to do something had he known about it ahead of time. However, those various emotions soon disappeared, leaving behind only a desire to apologize to Korone. He wondered if there had been anything more he could have done.

But it seemed he would not be given time to lighten his heavy heart. He heard voices as people approached after hearing the explosion.

"Heeey!"

"Yukiko! Yukiko!"

The girl in Akuto's arms reacted to those voices. He waited for her to wake up and then placed her down on her own two feet.

"Are you okay? Sorry about scaring you. It seems some people have come for you."

The girl named Yukiko looked up at him with a blank look.

"Are you the demon king?"

That question shocked Akuto, but he had to give a mature answer when speaking to a child.

"Um...no. But...Some people do call me that."

Yukiko looked up at him with a look of wonder.

But then the voices of the approaching villagers grew tenser.

"Yukiko! That's dangerous!"

"Get away from him!"

However, the villagers did not come any closer. They kept their distance with looks of fear on their faces.

That alone would not have been too bad, but when Yukiko did not immediately leave Akuto's side, they began picking up stones and throwing them at him.

"Wah..."

Akuto wanted to avoid the stones, but he realized doing so would let

one of them strike Yukiko. He gave up on dodging and instead knocked them down with his hands. He slapped the fist-sized stones aside. He had strengthened his physical body with mana, so this was a simple feat. However, he had forgotten to take into account what normal people would think when they saw how simply he managed it.

"H-he's a monster!"

"Run, Yukiko!"

—Oh, crap.

The rain of stones grew more intense. He was forced to lean over Yukiko to protect her, but that only provoked the villagers further.

"H-he's trying to abduct her!"

—No, I'm not...

He complained silently, but he doubted the villagers would be willing to listen. Instead, he decided to persuade Yukiko.

"If you do not go back to them, they probably will not stop throwing stones," he said, but Yukiko still looked like she wanted to say something. So he asked, "What is it?"

She replied, "Are you my brother's friend?"

He had realized she was Hiroshi's little sister, so he was able to answer that question honestly.

"You are Miwa Hiroshi-kun's little sister, right? In that case, I am."

"Then..." Yukiko grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Please tell me the truth! Is my brother the hero?"

Akuto did not understand what exactly she meant by that question or why she asked it with such desperation.

"No, he is not. Nor does he want to be."

He readily answered, but Yukiko suddenly kicked him in the shin.

"Ah..."

The kick did not hurt, but it still elicited a voice of surprise. Yukiko used the opportunity to slip from Akuto's hands and run away. She was crying.

"Yukiko got away!"

"This way! Hurry! Run!"

Akuto could hear those voices in the distance.

"Honestly..."

Akuto had no choice but to run away as well. He quickly left after meeting up with Keena who was hiding behind a tree.

"A-chan, are you okay?"

"Yes...but there are just too many things about this that bother me. Not to mention Korone... What am I supposed to do?"

Notes:

Jump up ↑ In this volume, Korone has started using "watashi" to refer to herself. Previously, she would use "jibun" which can be seen as more detached.

Chapter 4: The Legendary Hero Arrives!

Part 1

With Korone, the person they had been pursuing, Hiroshi, and everything else, Akuto did not get much sleep. He was a natural worrier, so he could only lie blankly in his room in the lodging facility. If Korone had been with him, she would have teased him regardless of what happened. Akuto realized that she had helped him out a lot with his past worries, but it now only made him all the more aware of her absence.

This vicious cycle wore him out and he began dozing off as dawn approached, but he was suddenly awoken by Junko early in the morning.

"You fool! What have you done!? Look out to the front of the lodging facility! The villagers are calling for you!"

Akuto jumped out of bed when he heard that.

Junko seemed to have come as is after waking up because she was wearing a T-shirt and track pants. The look on her face told him the situation had begun to develop in an odd direction.

Akuto immediately recalled what had happened the day before. The villagers were likely angry about what had happened with Yukiko.

"What a pain... But I suppose I was in the wrong."

"You idiot! What did you do!?"

"It wasn't my fault...but I think they've made a misunderstanding."

He looked at the clock. It was 5 in the morning. He walked out into the passageway to find Mitsuko-sensei and Hiroshi.

"What's this? Some kind of riot? Maybe a big riot on a small island would be fun. ...Or maybe not."

Either because she had just woken up or because of her natural lack of morals, Mitsuko-sensei seemed quite excited. Meanwhile, Hiroshi's expression was stiff and he was doing his best not to look Akuto in the eye.

—This isn't good...

Akuto was feeling a bit depressed, but he was never lacking when it came to a sense responsibility or justice. He truly felt sorry for what he had done and decided to go apologize.

"I will explain the situation to the villagers. They should understand then. I cannot allow them to cause a commotion."

"I think this is enough of a commotion already," joked Mitsuko-sensei.

Hiroshi's expression grew even darker, but he spoke to Akuto as he tried to move past Hiroshi.

"Aniki, I'm sorry the people of my hometown are doing this..."

“Don’t worry about it. After what I did, it isn’t surprising they’re mistaken about what happened. But I’m sure they’ll understand once I speak with them.”

Akuto walked toward the front door. However, he realized just how abnormal the situation was when he caught a glimpse outside the hallway window.

Approximately twenty villager men stood around the entrance. They were all middle-aged to elderly. Every single one of them held either a shotgun or large knife. They all had bloodshot eyes and abnormal expressions. However, Akuto could tell these expressions were based in fear, not a desire to fight.

—They’re scared... But that’s all the more reason I need to solve this misunderstanding.

Akuto gulped.

He had to prepare himself. These people were so scared no one could say what they would do. If he only had to worry about himself, he would not be too worried, but he could not let this cause problems for those around him. And even if he could handle physical damage, the mental damage was hard to bear.

He resolved himself and opened the door. He was met with a great muttering and many gazes.

The ring around the entrance spread out.

"I am Sai Akuto, a first year from Constant Magic Academy. You are here about last night, aren't you?" began Akuto.

A man of about 40 who seemed to be their representative stepped forward with a shotgun resting on his shoulder. His hair was close-cropped and he was well built, but there was obvious tension in his step.

"Are you the one who attacked a child from the village?"

"If you are talking about the girl named Yukiko, then I am the one you want. However, I did not actually attack her. I only startled her a bit, thinking she was someone else."

"Thinking she was someone else? You make that sound like nothing. Yukiko was crying and she called you a demon king."

"Only the words of a child," replied Akuto. When the villagers began muttering amongst themselves, he realized that may not have been the best thing to say. "No, I am only saying that no demon king exists. That was just a childish delusion."

Akuto was simply trying to gloss over the issue, but his desire to make himself look good and his clear voice made the others think he was boldly proclaiming it.

Yet the man with the close-cropped hair did not back down.

“W-wait... That makes no sense. You were predicted to become a demon king in the future, weren’t you? And those predictions have never been wrong. How is that a delusion?”

“The prediction itself is a delusion. All of you are simply being manipulated. I have heard the prediction concerning this island. That is what you are afraid of, isn’t it? But as you can see, I am nothing more than a student. I do not have that much power.”

The villagers fell silent at that. When he stated it with such conviction, there was nothing they could say. And it was true that Akuto was nothing more than a boy with a slightly better than average build. This pleased Akuto.

“I of course apologize for what happened. It was indeed me who made Yukiko-chan cry. I am very sorry.”

Akuto gave a deep bow.

When he went that far, the tension surrounding the villagers began to lessen. The man with the close-cropped hair must have decided Akuto could actually be spoken with because he asked a question with a somewhat gentle expression.

“Sorry for putting it this way, but a lot of the students at your school are nothing but thugs. There have been a few commotions during past beach field trips. That’s why we were already on our guard. And then we were told someone known as a demon king would be coming. But I don’t see how someone you can have a normal conversation with could be a

demon king. The people of the village will still be concerned though. Now that they think the demonic beast from the prediction is real, that isn't too surprising."

"If they have some form of evidence, I can see why. Did something happen?" asked Akuto to further eliminate the tension.

"Yesterday, people said they heard roars coming from the lake the legend says the demonic beast comes from. There were also reports of extremely isolated earthquakes. And for a while now, people claim to have seen a suspicious man walking around. But it seems that man was not you. When that man passes by, people say they hear a strange noise and get a headache."

That man sounded familiar to Akuto. He decided the misunderstanding would be easier to deal with if he told them the truth.

"If you rationally inspect these incidents, I think you will find they all have different causes. As for the suspicious man, I may have seen him too. I was pursuing someone last night. It was that pursuit that Yukiko-chan was accidentally involved in."

"So that's it."

"I too am worried about this man. I will help in any way I can."

Akuto smiled at the man with the close-cropped hair and the man smiled back.

"I like the sound of help from an excellent student who knows a lot about magic. I hope you can-..."

Just as the man reached out for a handshake, a high-pitched voice cried out from within the group of villagers.

"Liar! He's lying! If there's no demon king, there's no hero either!"

It was Yukiko's voice. She pushed her way past the adults' legs and glared at Akuto.

"Eh?"

Akuto was confused, but the villagers only laughed.

"Ha ha ha ha! Oh, that's right, that's right. If there was a demon king, then there would have to be a hero, wouldn't there!? But that also means no demon king means no hero."

The man with the close-cropped hair rubbed Yukiko's head as he said that. Yukiko listened with a frustrated expression. She looked as if she could start crying at any moment.

Akuto was visibly puzzled, so the villagers explained.

"Her family seems to think that her older brother is the predicted hero."

"But none of us believe it. Sorry, but he just isn't the type."

"He's just so weak."

"Yeah, he's no hero. He's been a complete coward since he was little."

"And he isn't all that bright either."

The villagers roared with laughter.

Yukiko began to cry. While sobbing, she raised a small voice of protest.

"Why do you all make fun of him...? He got into the magic academy, so he's amazing... And once he makes something of himself, you'll all gladly rely on him..."

She spoke so quietly that the villagers could not hear. However, Akuto heard her. It was possible his hearing had gotten better.

At any rate, Akuto grasped the complex situation.

"It isn't right to laugh at people," said Akuto.

He had meant it as a quiet voice, but all of the villagers turned toward him at once.

"Ah? Oh...did we make this uncomfortable for you?"

"Well, yes. You are laughing at someone who has left the island to do his very best."

Akuto's voice grew louder and deeper.

The villagers moved away from Akuto. This was not simply due to fear. The pressure around him had literally increased. Mana light burst out at his feet and instantaneously spread out in a ring. Power was leaking out because he was so worked up that he could not control it.

"W-wait... This was just a joke. Everyone talks about people behind their back like this. It's a sign of affection..."

The villagers were obviously flustered.

"That is not what I am taking issue with. You talk about someone being weak while you yourselves are the weakest of all. You believe in the legend. However, you refuse to believe in the hero who says he will leave your village. You only believe in the demon king part of the legend and that makes you worried. If that is not weakness, then what is it!? You involve politics in your everyday lives. You always act as a group. You attack the timid first and try to curry favor with anyone who looks powerful. That is what I am taking issue with!" Akuto's voice had raised to a shout at some point. And he was the type who could not stop himself once he got going. "This village will obviously be destroyed without anyone having to attack it! It pisses me off that you bring weapons to confront a student yet you don't even realize how laughable your cowardice is!"

Akuto grabbed the barrel of a nearby shotgun and pushed it out of the way, but the frightened man holding it reflexively pulled the trigger.

A blast rang out. The barrel had been pointed at Akuto's gut. If a human body received that shot at close range, it would be left with a giant hole. However, this was Akuto. He shook slightly but was otherwise fine. Small pieces of lead fell to the ground from below where his shirt had been burned and torn.

"W-wah! He's a monster!" shouted the villagers.

On top of that, the roar of a beast could be heard in the distance. This roar reminded Akuto of the demonic beast in the lake the villagers had mentioned. He did not know if the roar was actually produced by a demonic beast, but everyone there clearly heard it.

—Not good. I don't know what that sound is, but this was the worst possible timing. This really makes it look like I'm a demon king!

Akuto finally calmed down. The villagers were frozen in place as they surrounded him. They clearly feared opposing him because they were trying to be as unassuming as possible in how they held their guns and knives. That was a bad omen. Even if they all charged at him at once, Akuto was confident he could neutralize them. However, he would have a hard time dealing with the situation if they all ran off at once.

—I really need stop taking things past the point of no return... Ahh, if only Korone was here. She could probably settle this for me.

That hopeless wish floated up in the back of his mind, but then help came from an unexpected place.

"P-please don't...do anything to them," said a voice behind Akuto.

Hiroshi walked out of the lodging facility entrance.

—Thank goodness. If Hiroshi stands up for them here and I give in, everything will be resolved.

Akuto breathed an internal sigh of relief.

Yukiko ran over to Hiroshi.

"Onii-chan! Help! You're strong, right? You aren't actually that demon king's friend, right? You were only pretending so you could defeat him here on the island, right?" asked Yukiko while in tears.

The villagers looked toward Hiroshi as if to say "It couldn't be..." or "Wait, really?"

Hiroshi was obviously unsure how to reply. His lack of confidence led him to fear the eyes of the villagers. For that reason, he could neither affirm nor deny what Yukiko had said. And yet clearly stating one or the other would prevent future sorrow for Yukiko.

—It's because he acts like this!

Akuto could have given up here, but Hiroshi's attitude irritated him. The power still leaking from him began to whirl violently around him. This was the boy who had fought a 15 meter dragon barehanded. Only a very powerful person could approach him when he was pissed.

And of course, Hiroshi was frightened. But this only further rubbed Akuto the wrong way.

He took a step toward Hiroshi. He was planning to speak his mind about how the other boy was acting. However, no one watching on thought he was simply going to speak his mind. It looked more like he was going to incinerate both Hiroshi and Yukiko until not even their bones remained.

"W-waaah!"

Hiroshi had either grown truly desperate or was simply trying to push Akuto away because he jabbed his right hand forward while holding Yukiko in his left arm. The hand struck Akuto in the chest.

It made a ridiculously soft sound, but that sound brought Akuto back to his senses.

—Oh, um... I've done it again. What do I do now? Oh, I know. I just have to lose the fight here!

Akuto thought this was an excellent idea.

"Y-you beat me," said Akuto as he limply collapsed backwards. He

closed his eyes and lay on the ground.

—That went well.

Akuto was the only one who thought the silence meant he had succeeded.

Then again, he had succeeded to defuse the situation. Just not in the way he had intended.

“Wh-what was that?”

“What a strange person.”

The villagers began to leave.

“I know what happened. The Miwa boy must have paid someone with powerful magic.”

“Oh, so the attack on his sister was an act, too?”

“I bet all of this was.”

They were all saying things like that.

—H-huh? Wait. This isn’t good. I get the feeling I did something inexcusable to Hiroshi.

Akuto opened his eyes.

He first saw Yukiko running off in tears.

Hiroshi looked over at Akuto who was still collapsed on the ground. Akuto received a direct look at the tears in Hiroshi's eyes. He saw an unexplainable expression on his face. Akuto had never before seen the look in his eyes. It was a look he wanted to forget as soon as possible but that he doubted he could ever forget. Every time he recalled it, he was filled with regret.

However, Akuto and Hiroshi's gazes only met for an instant. Despite being out in the open, Hiroshi shed tears as he ran away after Yukiko.

—Crap...

Akuto had felt regret a few times already on this beach field trip, but this was by far the worst.

"You fool! You have done something truly horrible!"

Junko slapped Akuto. He had been punched and kicked before, but this was the first time he had received a slap filled with such emotion.

"I...regret what I did."

Akuto's head hung down. Junko raised the corners of her eyes and placed her hands on her hips.

"If you can regret it now, why did you let your feelings explode back then? They may have made a misunderstanding, but those villagers meant no harm. There is nothing wrong with protesting on the behalf of one of their children. The problem here is that you so thoroughly insist on doing the right thing that you cannot forgive the weak!"

"I know that... I know that now. I didn't before though. It's hard to explain..." said Akuto as he kept his gaze on the ground.

The villagers had left after finding it all to be laughable. Keena had pursued Hiroshi and Akuto trusted she would bring him back. Akuto was in his room at the lodging facility being lectured by Junko.

"You mean you do not understand how the weak feel, don't you? I suppose you wouldn't!"

"No...I understand...or I try to. I grew up poor in an orphanage and have been surrounded by plenty of misfortune."

Akuto seemed truly depressed, so Junko found it hard to say any more. She placed a hand on her head, looked away from him, and began speaking as if it was not her problem.

"According to my father, those undergoing training become unable to forgive the weak. And you never had a tolerant personality to begin with."

"I'm intolerant?" asked Akuto in a serious tone of voice.

Junko gave a bitter smile and replied, "You always insist that people must do the right thing. How is that tolerant?"

"Oh... I see."

Akuto brought a hand to his chin as if he had never realized that before.

Junko could not help but laugh.

"You idiot. Why are you listening to my lecture so diligently? This is not like you."

"Don't laugh. I think this is one of the areas where we are similar," said Akuto.

This must have surprised Junko because her face reddened and she stopped moving. She then began speaking quietly while almost mumbling.

"Stop that. This is why I cannot just leave you be."

Hearing that, Akuto nodded and said, "And I am always thankful for it."

Junko completely froze in place now.

"I am t-trying to lecture you."

"And that is what I am thankful for."

"But then it does not feel like I am lecturing you. Couldn't you at least cry a little?"

Junko intentionally raised her voice a bit.

"I am diligently listening. I thought that was best."

"No, I think that is the problem. If you would be a little more defiant this would feel more worthwhile."

"I can't be defiant just because you tell me to."

"I suppose not... I am done here. Just remember that you need to be more tolerant. You also need to apologize to Hiroshi later." Junko cleared her throat and changed the subject. "By the way, I noticed Korone was not with you. If she had been there, this could have been dealt with more easily."

Akuto's expression grew grim. He then explained the situation to Junko.

"Seducing you? Dismissed? I see... I had thought she was acting oddly."

Junko blushed when she recalled what had happened.

"A-anyway, I cannot forgive whoever did something so cruel. You should make an official objection to have her brought back."

Akuto nodded, but then spoke.

"The seduction is one thing, but if her dismissal was decided politically, we have no choice but to go along with it. What am I supposed to do?"

Junko sighed and said, "Remember what you said about making sure everything went well?"

Akuto's expression once more said he had only just realized this.

"Oh, you're right. I did decide that, didn't I? But this will make it look like I want to oppose the government. Can I never escape that?"

Akuto looked troubled, so Junko spoke lightly.

"When you possess great power, you take on responsibility to match. If you do not want to become a demon king, you need to keep up with your studies and become a central member of the government. But for now, just go apologize to Hiroshi."

Junko then waved her hand as she left the room.

Meanwhile, Keena caught up with Hiroshi. He had not wanted to return to the village or the school lodging facility, so he had been forced to wander around the woods in the area. It was not surprising that he had been found so quickly.

"Hey, A-chan didn't mean any harm."

Keena walked behind Hiroshi whose head was drooping down.

"I already know that. And that's what makes this so hard," said Hiroshi sadly before sinking to the ground as if he was sick of walking. "I know it's my fault for being weak. What aniki said was right and I understand why everyone laughs at me."

"But Hiroshi-kun, you're better at magic than me and you have more friends than me."

Keena crouched down in front of Hiroshi.

"That's not the issue. What I don't like are the expectations placed on me. I'm not strong enough to live up to those expectations."

"Expectations?"

"The village's expectations for me are just too heavy. And...this may be an odd thing to say, but I hate justice," said Hiroshi as he raised his head.

"Justice?"

Keena tilted her head in confusion.

“Or rather, I hate people who force their ideas of justice on others. Most of the people in the village are like that. It’s a small village, so they decide these strange rules that protect the village are what justice is. But those rules also cause a lot of friction in a small village like this.”



"Oh, I think I know what you mean."

"That was why I wanted to become one of the people who makes those rules if I got stronger. ...But I guess thinking about that is pointless when I'm this weak."

Hiroshi gave a feeble smile.

"No. I think you're plenty strong, Hiroshi-kun. But you're kind, so you're afraid of getting too strong and hurting others."

Keena smiled.

Hiroshi looked away in embarrassment.

"S-stop that. That isn't true."

"But it was because you're strong and kind that you fought for A-chan, right? You even got hurt."

"I only got hurt because I'm weak."

"No. Wasn't that because you didn't want to hurt your opponent?"

"You're overestimating me..."

"Eh? But you're a hero, aren't you?"

"I'm no hero. In fact, it's because I don't want to be one that-..." Hiroshi trailed off when he saw that Keena obviously wanted to say something. He then stood up as if he had just realized something. "Okay, I'll prove to you how ridiculous that legend is. Come with me. I'll take you to the location from the legend."

Hiroshi then began walking.

Part 2

Meanwhile back at the academy, Fujiko was awakened by a call from Junko. It was still seven in the morning.

<Senpai, there is something I would like for you to look into.>

Junko wanted her to look into Korone's dismissal. Fujiko was in a bad mood after being woken up and she had almost no connection to Korone, so she had no reason to accept.

"I do not think so. Why would I do anything for that intrusion of a L'Isle-Adam?"

As soon as she complained, the person on the other end of the telepathic communication changed. This was Junko's strategy.

<Senpai, I urge you to do this.>

"Akuto-sama!" Fujiko's attitude completely changed. "Yes! Right away! I will get to the bottom of this!"

Fujiko then headed to the underground palace.

"...and that is what happened."

She informed Peterhausen about what Akuto had told her. Her own

network could not tell her what was happening in the center of the government, so it would be faster to ask that dragon that possessed functions equivalent to a god. Peterhausen knew a lot about the world, but he could not provide an answer about anything besides a direct question because the amount of data was so great. Fujiko did not know if that was a problem of ability or personality, but she had grasped that characteristic while speaking with him.

"I cannot obtain logs on those in the center of the government."

What he referred to as a log was the record of a human's actions that was transmitted to their god via the mana in their brain. Those records allowed the gods to evaluate people's actions. Peterhausen was the god of the black magicians who opposed that system. He held the capacity to take logs from any human.

"I thought you could access logs from anyone."

"If I was currently able to do that, the government would have been long since overthrown. Followers must register with their god. That is known as a baptism. While a baptism is not needed to offer one's log up to me, it is necessary that the person acknowledges me and is willing to provide me with that log."

"So that is it..."

"Even so, rumors of my presence have spread. The logs are beginning to gather bit by bit. However, I have nothing from anyone who knows about Korone. In fact, even if I did know, I could not tell you."

"Why not?" asked Fujiko.

Peterhausen grinned.

"I have the same duty as a god. To preserve people's human rights, I am forbidden from telling anyone the contents of others' logs."

"That is surprising."

"Black magicians insist on equality. They do not spy on or use these logs as the government does. You too are a black magician, aren't you?"

"Two of my favorite terms are 'underhanded' and 'emergency measures'."

"What a troublesome girl... At any rate, was that your only question?"

"Yes. If you cannot help with Korone, I will investigate using my own network. On a more personal level, I suppose I would like to know more about Akuto-sama. With his power, I would think he could take control of that entire village."

"Something along those same lines is concerning me."

"Eh?" Fujiko was confused by Peterhausen's strange attitude. "There is something that concerns you?"

Peterhausen nodded.

“When I choose a master, I am giving that master the right to control me. I cannot act autonomously, but my current master does not intend to fully control me. That has left me incomplete.”

—Does that mean...!?

That explanation led a lot of things to click into place in Fujiko’s mind.

“So Akuto-sama will become a demon king when the desire to become one settles in his mind?” muttered Fujiko.

Peterhausen confirmed it.

“My master must make the decision to destroy the current system and construct a new order. That is the moment I am waiting for.”

—That will be the moment when the demon king is born!

Fujiko’s body trembled in surprise. Akuto was not yet a demon king, but the key to becoming one was contained within his will.

“That makes me want to seduce him or use any other means necessary.” Fujiko licked her lips. “I too desire to start a revolution. This gives me all the more reason to bring Akuto-sama’s heart to me.”

"How reliable. I too am waiting for that moment. If he remains as he is, it will lead to problems."

"Problems?"

"Yes..."

"Is this the lake?"

Keena let out a cry of joy in front of a lovely lake.

The lake was a pure blue. It was surrounded by white sand and was large enough that one had to move their head side to side in order to see the entire thing. The ring of white and blue within the green of the mountain was beautiful.

"Yes. This is the legendary lake."

"It's so pretty. I can see why people would make a weird legend about it!" said Keena excitedly.

But Hiroshi shook his head.

"No. This lake is in the very center of the island, so don't you find it odd that it has a white beach around it and that the water is so blue?"

"Is that odd? I don't really know."

"Then I will keep this simple: this is the ocean. There is a cave underground that connects it to the ocean."

"Oh, I see," said Keena.

Just then, a great roar came from the mountain next to the lake.

"Kyah!"

Keena covered her ears and curled up on the ground, but Hiroshi only explained calmly.

"The underground cave has a large empty space and a hole that leads to the mountain. That allows air to get in. About once a year, something about the morning and evening or the condition of the waves causes that noise. It is especially loud this year. That is why everyone believes in the demonic beast."

"Eh? Really?"

Keena looked up at Hiroshi.

"Yes. I am actually not that good at swimming...but I guess you already heard about that. Anyway, I was secretly practicing with my little sister in this lake because everyone stays away thanks to the legend. I ended up sinking and would have drowned had I not found the cave down below.

That was when I realized the secret of the noise. I could hear it roaring while I was inside. Ha ha ha," laughed Hiroshi. "And as I said before, this island is only 100 years old. He's dead now, but my grandfather was the first settler here. That's why I know one other secret the others don't."

"A secret?" asked Keena.

Hiroshi pointed toward a narrow path leading around the lake.

"That path leads to the mountain end of the cave. There is a shrine inside and the proof of the hero has been left there."

"Eh? The proof of the hero?"

"Ridiculous, right? Especially since that shrine has my grandfather's name on it. By the way, the proof of the hero is a small sword stuck in a stone. Supposedly, only the hero can pull it out. I jokingly tried to pull it out once but couldn't. When I told my father, he was angry but in an odd way. He told me to study. That was how I ended up coming to the academy. But that also taught me that it is all just a farce. It's just a legend my family made up. Isn't it ridiculous?" Hiroshi smiled, but his voice was growing more and more tearful. "That's why it's so...painful to be called a hero... It's all an act put on by my family. Also, I was late to the aptitude test when entering the academy, so I took it after everyone else was gone. Do you know what I got?"

"What's wrong, Hiroshi-kun? And no, I don't know."

"My result was 'hero'. But the teacher kept it a secret. I think that was

because she didn't believe it...unlike aniki and his 'demon king' result. Does that make any sense?"

As Hiroshi's voice sank, Keena saw a pathetic expression on his face.

But she looked him straight in the eye.

"It makes perfect sense."

"Eh?"

"After all, you believed that A-chan was a demon king. That was because you wanted to believe that you're a hero, right?"

Hiroshi did not know what to say in response.

"N-no...I did that because..."

He tried to deny it, but he could not find a way to do so.

He had always yearned for strength. Whether it was for good or evil, he had yearned for strength. And so he had taken a liking to Akuto's confidence. He had felt as if he would grow stronger if he stayed with Akuto. But whenever the situation threatened to remind him of his weakness, he would always run away.

Hiroshi was at a loss for words when he realized that. And Keena smiled

at him.

"Hey, let's go see that shrine."

"Eh? But it's only-..."

"I don't mind. C'mon, let's go."

Keena pulled on Hiroshi's hand as he hesitated. She then ran down the small path Hiroshi had pointed out.

After heading down that deserted path for a while, they came to a fairly open area. The surface entrance to the shrine's cave was likely there.

But Hiroshi and Keena stopped in their tracks when they noticed someone standing there.

"Huh?"

Both of them grew suspicious. The person was so suspicious that they instinctually lowered their voices.

The man was looking out across the lake. He had his back to them, but they could still tell just how bizarre a person he was. He was wearing a long white coat even in the summer. Even over his coat, they could tell he had a tall, tough body.

"Wh-who is that?"

"Hmm, he looks like a very strange person," said Keena despite being very strange herself.

"There's no one like that in the village."

"I suppose there wouldn't be..."

Hiroshi and Keena hid in a thicket on the side of the path.

Suddenly, the man opened the front of his coat.

"Wait, is that-..."

"That's exactly what a pervert does..."

The man then yelled loudly toward the lake.

"Lake! Hear my shout!"

The man then began shouting just as he had proclaimed. He was not simply speaking loudly. It was a shout. It was a cry with no meaning. And he was performing perfect diaphragmatic breathing. To put it bluntly, it was quite annoying.

"Nishugyuouuuwashaaagyoiiimouudiematoouuuukorponoojibotsugar

They were quite a ways from the village and there was no fear of the villagers approaching the lake right now. Whether he was taking that into account or not, the man cried out as loudly as he could.

After finally finishing, Hiroshi and Keena exchanged a glance.

"Wh-what was that?"

"H-he really is a dangerous person..."

Now that he was done shouting, the man said something surprising.

"Now then, my voice is in top form today. That is enough warming up for now."

The man then shook his opened coat.

The coat began emitting noise. The inside of the coat seemed to have speakers installed. And loud ones at that.

Hiroshi and Keena instinctually covered their ears. The sound produced was even more unpleasant and even more meaningless than the man's shouting.

The great din of noise coming from the speakers was a mixture of metal scraping together, explosions, electronic noises, and the static of a radio being tuned randomly.

And on top of it all, the man began shouting once more.

"Mhaouuuwakootottooojopooosareeedafwoonaaooeah!"

As he shouted, he bent over backwards, collapsed to the ground, and began writhing around. It looked like he was being shocked by electricity. Or perhaps like he these were his death throes.

Hiroshi and Keena were at a loss for words.

However, what happened next left them at even more of a loss for words.

The man finally ended the noise and shouting. He stood up while gasping for breath as if he had used up all his strength.

"The real fun is about to begin."

That was enough to almost make Hiroshi and Keena fall over in shock, but what the man said next were even more shocking for a different reason.

"I have obtained the noise pattern of the demon king. Now, listen, you pathetic demonic beast!"

"Problems will arise if he tries to use me before he has fully awakened as a demon king," explained Peterhausen.

"What do you mean?" asked Fujiko.

"I was created in order to provide magic for all of humanity. However, that resulted in me affecting other life forms as well. And that has caused serious bugs in some life forms."

Fujiko was able to guess what he was talking about.

"You don't mean..."

She gasped and Peterhausen nodded.

"The mana inside the life form's body goes berserk and their form and nature change. That is what we call a demonic beast. A fully awakened demon king can control me, but otherwise demonic beasts will appear in various places. It could also resurrect demonic beasts that were sealed in the past." Peterhausen continued. "Demonic beasts are activated by the wavelength of the mana inside the demon king's body. As such, demonic beasts will listen to the demon king's orders. That should hold true for my current master as well."

"Come to think of it, I heard that Akuto-sama managed to remove the mana from a demonic beast in the mountain behind the school."

"Demonic beasts can be useful in battle, but while my master is an incomplete demon king, he will only produce pitiable demonic beasts

that hold no purpose."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A roar reverberated from the lake. It was clearly the roar of some sort of life form.

"This is...different from normal..."

Even Hiroshi was panicked.

"Different?" asked Keena.

Hiroshi's face paled and he replied, "This isn't the sound I know. Don't tell me this is the real-..."

The center of the lake exploded. A pillar of water shot over ten meters into the air. The roar came from the center of that pillar and the seawater was blasted in every direction.

The torrential spray reached even Hiroshi and Keena.

"Hya ha ha ha ha ha! It has been resurrected!" shouted the perverted-looking man.

The spray had soaked him as well, but he did not seem to care. He

spread his arms as if overcome by exhilaration.

The demonic beast that had come from the center of the lake was now visible.

It looked like a giant cylindrical tower. It was so thick not even three people would have been able to reach all the way around it. It was about the height of a five story building. The top had a large opening and whisker-like tentacles were stretching from it. It was a dark reddish-brown with a leopard-like pattern covering it.

"It's a sea cucumber..." muttered Keena.

"The sea cucumbers in the ocean here were the demonic beast? W-we need to get out of here and tell someone..."

Hiroshi was just about to turn tail and flee, when...

"Kyaaah!"

He heard a high-pitched scream.

And Hiroshi knew the voice all too well.

"Yukiko..."

Hiroshi turned around to find Yukiko screaming upon seeing the

demonic beast. If that was all there was to it, he could just take her with him when he fled. However, her scream had led the man to notice her.

The perverted man turned around. He had dark skin, his hair was kept short, and he wore sunglasses.

None of that was all that odd, but his expression was far from normal. Even with the sunglasses on, the way he smiled made it look like he was possessed.

"You saw it, didn't you!?" said the perverted man as he slowly approached.

He should hardly have been surprised someone had noticed after summoning the demonic beast so loudly, but it was the perfect perverted comment.

"N-nooo..."

Yukiko's legs froze up and she could not move.

The perverted man spread his arms as he approached her.

"W-wait!" shouted Hiroshi.

The man twisted his head at an odd angle. He looked back and forth between Hiroshi and Yukiko.

"Ahh, looks like I have a big and small version of the same face here. Not that the big one is all that big."

He then began approaching Yukiko with unexpected speed.

"Stop!" yelled Hiroshi.

"Onii-chan!" screamed Yukiko.

The perverted man picked up Yukiko.

"I'll be taking the small one as a hostage. And you, big one, don't try to run away... But that's the normal method for a villain, so it's just boring. Well, I guess I have no choice this time. Still, it isn't art unless it's a strategy no one else could have thought up. Don't you agree?"

The perverted man spoke amiably with Hiroshi.

—Dammit, who is this guy?

Hiroshi's body trembled with both anger and fear, but he had to protect Yukiko at all costs.

"Let go of my sister."

"No, I don't think so. This isn't art either, so it's boring. But she saw this, so I have to eliminate her. And the same goes for you."

The man had clearly used the word “eliminate”. Tension ran through Hiroshi’s body.

—Where’s Keena-chan...!?

He turned around to find only Keena’s clothes lying on the ground. It seemed she had succeeded in disappearing. It was possible Keena could help rescue Yukiko.

—If that pervert isn’t too skilled with magic, we should be able to manage.

Hiroshi took a fighting stance and slowly moved forward.

The perverted man burst out laughing.

“Are you from the academy? That means you’re trying to use magic, right?”

“What’s so funny!?”

“The fact that this is reckless. Then again, I need you to take this seriously. Remaining serious while doing something reckless is art. I have to do my best to ensure your efforts are truly reckless.”

The man’s reasoning was incredibly strange.

"Quit...joking around!"

Hiroshi tried to produce a mana ball in a hand behind his back. He would prepare a means of attack where the man could not see and then fire it when he had a chance.

But...

—What?

Hiroshi was dumbfounded. He could not produce the mana ball.

"Impossible..."

There was no way he could have failed simply from being nervous, and yet he found himself unable to gather mana.

"Ha ha ha ha haaa!" laughed the perverted man suddenly.

Hiroshi's eyes opened in shock as the man pointed behind himself. He pointed toward the lake.

The demonic beast was still in the center of the lake. It looked like a great tower. Its body was pulsating as if it was drawing something into its body.

"...Ahh!"

Hiroshi realized what was happening. Light was gathering near the demonic beast's mouth.

"Don't tell me...it's gathering mana..."

"Yes! This demonic beast absorbs mana! Almost everything in this world requires mana to function. So if this thing shows up..."

The perverted man laughed in pure amusement.

"What are you trying to do with that thing?" asked Hiroshi and the man began laughing even harder.

"Why would I tell you that? But what I will tell you is that I personally want destruction and chaos. This is anarchy! This is art!"

"This guy's insane..." muttered Hiroshi.

The perverted man gave an incredibly menacing look and began yelling.

"Insane? This is the problem with people who don't understand! They don't understand what noise truly is! With destruction, you can't just destroy things! Something cheap can only be destroyed in a cheap way! Chaos brings out the true essence of humanity!"

This only caused Hiroshi's face to pale further, but the man's calm expression returned in the next moment as if the fit of shouting had never happened.

"Well, I suppose normal people will never understand art even if you explain it to them. If you have never created art yourself, you will never understand a discussion of art. Now, enough pointless chatter."

The perverted man began slowly moving toward Hiroshi. When Hiroshi realized what that meant, he felt a chill run down his spine.

—He's really planning to eliminate everyone who saw him...

The man still held Yukiko, but Hiroshi could not use magic to try to save her. And Hiroshi was not so weak that he would run away here.

—Even if I can't use magic, I can at least let Yukiko escape.

Hiroshi resolved himself for what had to be done. But then something happened that told him the situation would only grow worse. Something flesh-colored shot by in the corner of Hiroshi's vision.

—!

Keena was naked and sneaking up behind the perverted man. She had likely not heard the previous conversation. She still thought she was invisible. She walked right up to the man and reached out to snatch Yukiko from him.

If she had been invisible, she would likely have taken Yukiko and created an opening to attack. And since Hiroshi had known she could turn invisible, he could have used the chance to attack. However, the area's mana being absorbed meant Keena was completely visible.

—Aaaahhh...

Keena seemed to notice the worried look on Hiroshi's face. She held her thumb up in his direction as if to say, "Don't worry." And then she circled around to the front of the perverted man to swipe Yukiko from him.

"Hey," said the man.

Only then did Keena realize she was visible.

"Ehh!? Why!?"

The man used his open hand to swiftly grab Keena's wrist.

"I don't know what you're asking about, but why are you naked?"

"Noooo!"

Keena resisted, but the man was too strong for her. He grew overly excited and began speaking about his nonsensical ideas once more.

“Sneaking up behind someone in the nude!? Now that is art! You can join the ranks of nude artists! They have used nudity to bring peace, harmony, and – most importantly – confusion to the cities!”

As the perverted man laughed, he held Yukiko and Keena in his arms.

“Kyaaaah!”

“Noooo!”

Yukiko and Keena cried out.

“Yukiko!” shouted Hiroshi.

“Onii-chan, help!”

“Ha ha ha! That would be reckless! And therefore I must insist you try it!”

The man looked over at Hiroshi.

Hiroshi could instinctually tell he was no match for the man. He could not use magic. The man was much bigger than him. And the man had known ahead of time that magic would be unusable. He would have a method of fighting without magic.

—Dammit...

The situation drove Hiroshi to despair. He felt the most despair over his own weakness. It was not that he did not have the courage to face the man. He had the courage to confront an opponent who was doing something truly unreasonable. However, he had always avoided situations that were greatly altered by how much power one had. And in doing so, he had wasted any opportunity he might have had to grow stronger.

“Onii-chan is a hero! He’ll kick your butt right away!” angrily shouted Yukiko.

—No, I’m not.

Hiroshi silently denied it.

He was not powerful. If some powerful person decided something, he liked going along with it. Sacrificing his life for that was simple. However, he would rather die than make a decision that would affect someone else’s life.

—I’m no hero.

Hiroshi stood in place.

The perverted man approached. Both of his hands were full, but Hiroshi did not move.

The man's long leg drew an arc through the air. A kick shook Hiroshi's head.

His vision flipped upside down. An instant after the world shook from the impact, he could only see the slanted ground before his eyes.

"Onii-chan!" cried Yukiko.

"So this is the so-called hero?" asked the perverted man. "But I'm here to stop that hero from being born. I will throw the plans of the hero's birth out of order. That is part of my job."

—Wh-what is he saying...? The plans? Come to think of it, did he also know the demonic beast would appear here...?

Those questions filled his head which seemed oddly calm. He may have reached a state of complete desperation. Hiroshi subconsciously stood back up.

"Excellent! You stood back up! That is how you show your recklessness!" The man kicked once more. "But it won't change the situation! After all, you're weak! You are bound by the common knowledge of this world! And that is because you do not understand art!"

The perverted man shouted out his personal opinion, but what Hiroshi found truly hard to bear was the next strike and the words that followed.

The man stood skillfully on one leg and sent a forward kick towards Hiroshi.

His heel jabbed into Hiroshi's solar plexus and Hiroshi doubled over.

The man then raised his leg up high with his heel still jammed into Hiroshi's gut. He lifted the boy up into the air.

The man's balance and physical strength were both excellent. Even while holding two girls, he managed to lift Hiroshi up on his leg.

"And you are not letting your true self show through. You are prepared to throw away your life to hide it. Sorry, but someone like that has no right to complain no matter what you do to them. You have no right to hold a grudge against me. Goodbye."

With that, the perverted man swung his raised leg.

Hiroshi flew through the air and landed in the lake.

"Onii-chan!"

"Hiroshi-kun!"

Yukiko and Keena cried out. Hiroshi made a violent splashing sound. And even once the ripples disappeared, he did not come back up to the surface.

The perverted man nodded in satisfaction when he saw that.

"Now then... I need to deal with the two of you."

Both Keena and Yukiko had lost even the willpower to scream.

The man grinned as he looked back and forth between the two girls in his arms.

"Which one should I start with?"

He sounded like he was looking forward to it, but then he looked off into the distance as if he had detected something.

"Tch. The demon king has begun moving sooner than expected. He must have come after his classmates. And if I'm going to eliminate them anyway, it would be more artistic to do so while he watches."

He then began walking while still holding a weakly resisting Keena and a limp Yukiko.

Part 3

The demonic beast left the lake and began moving toward the village. It seemed to be seeking the area with the greatest concentration of mana. It could be seen even from a great distance.

Akuto and Junko had headed out to search for Hiroshi. They were left speechless for a moment after seeing the demonic beast.

As soon as Akuto saw it, he felt a sort of uneasiness in his chest.

—That monster... I feel like it's calling for me...

"Wh-what is that? Do you know?" asked Junko when she noticed how Akuto was acting.

"No, I don't," he replied as he looked over toward her.

She looked extremely afraid. After all, this was a giant sea cucumber. She had already been completely traumatized by sea cucumbers.

"If you're afraid, you can head back. I'm still going to check what it is, though," he said.

Junko's expression stiffened, but she immediately shook her head.

"I will go, too. I will not be a hindrance...but...if possible..."

Her words had initially held great force, but they gradually ran out of steam. Akuto smiled as he watched her.

"It's fine. You don't have to force yourself."

"I-I am not!" she immediately denied before continuing in a quieter voice. "If...if you are with me, I think I can manage."

Akuto smiled again.

"Then let's go. I have a strange feeling about that monster," he said as he began walking.

By the time they had spotted the demonic beast, they had already made it quite a ways from the lodging facility. Akuto assumed heading straight there would be faster than heading back to the lodging facility to check on the situation.

However, Akuto came to a stop soon thereafter. On the other side of a small path through the forest was a tall man. He had dark skin, sunglasses, and a long white coat.

"Who are you?" Akuto asked cautiously.

The man was blatantly suspicious.

"I will give you the name I have given myself! I am Mister X!" cried out

the perverted man.

The man's odd behavior left Akuto confused. And the ridiculousness of that name left him even more confused.

"...That is the name you gave yourself?" cut in Junko from the side.

"Watch out. He's probably a pervert."

"Silence! Honestly, you do not understand art at all!" shouted Mister X.

"Art?"

"Yes. I thought the demon king would have a better understanding of art."

As he spoke, Mister X stepped to the side. This revealed two hostages behind him.



"A-chan!" cried Keena.

She was nude and Yukiko stood beside her. They had collars on and Mister X held the other end of the chains attached to those collars.

"It looks like I didn't even need to ask who you are," said Akuto in a low

voice.

His gaze was piercing straight into Mister X. Whether the man was a magician or not, this gaze seemed to hold enough heat to incinerate him. However, Mister X only grinned.

"You're mad. I love seeing emotions expressed like that."

"What did you do to Keena!?" shouted Junko.

"Nothing at all. For now. However, I thought I would let the demon king watch as I killed her. The boy I dealt with before you arrived just wasn't enough fun."

Mister X's mocking words caused Junko's face to pale. Keena had pursued Hiroshi and Hiroshi's little sister, Yukiko, was with her.

"It can't be..." The expression of anger had completely left Akuto's face. He asked a question in a gentle voice. "Are you saying you killed that boy?"

"Yes. Was he a friend of yours? I kicked him and kicked him and kicked him and then threw him into the lake. If he could swim he might not have died, but the way I kicked him, he wouldn't have the strength left to swim."

"Then let's go with that."

"What?"

"I'm saying I'll do the same to you. But there isn't enough water to drown in around here, so I'll need to borrow some stomach acid."

"What are you-...?"

Mister X was unable to finish his sentence. His body doubled over. Akuto had thrown a kick and buried his foot in the man's solar plexus.

"Gh...khah..."

Akuto drew back his foot and Mister X coughed up the contents of his stomach while bent over.

"I mean I'm going to shove your face in that!"

Akuto tried to throw another kick toward the back of Mister X's head.

However, Mister X jumped back to avoid it while still vomiting.

—!

The man's unexpected speed shocked Akuto.

And it seemed Mister X was just as surprised. After he was finished vomiting, he laughed in pure enjoyment.

"Hyaaaaah ha ha ha ha ha! Amazing! You're faster than the data said and you have a shorter temper than the data said! Now this is art! I take back what I said! The demon king really does understand art!" Mister X pulled on the chains attached to Keena and Yukiko. "But this means I can't take care of these two without dealing with you first. I don't like using hostages, but if you don't-..."

Once more, Mister X was unable to finish speaking. Akuto moved even faster than before. He punched Mister X, sending the man's body flying several meters through the air.

"Guhaah!"

Mister X slammed into the ground.

"I would prefer not to get used to fighting, but I can't remain calm if I hear you killed my friend," said Akuto.

He easily broke the chains he had swiped at the same moment as punching the man.

"A-chan!" cried Keena as she embraced him.

He lightly stroked her head before breaking the lock to the two collars with his fingers.

"Wait here. I need to ask that man a few questions," he said.

However, Keena looked up at him worriedly.

"A-chan..."

"Hm? Don't worry. I'm not going to lose to the likes of-..."

"No."

"Eh?"

"Don't kill him."

Those words brought Akuto back to his senses.

—Not good. I didn't realize it until she pointed it out, but I was assuming it was only natural to kill him.

"I won't."

Akuto gave Keena a slight smile. He then removed his shirt, placed it over Keena, and turned toward Junko. She nodded and took Keena and Yukiko a short distance away.

Akuto then turned back toward Mister X.

"What is the goal behind all this nonsense?"

Mister X was only just managing to stand back up. He was still laughing. He appeared to be enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart.

"Oh, how amazing! No normal methods will cut it here!"

"What's so funny?"

"Experiencing art simply drives me insane! Don't you want to laugh at times like this!?"

"How should I know? And I'm asking you what you're trying to do here."

"Ha ha! You really know how to act stubborn! That too is art! And the answer to your question is quite simple."

Mister X pointed behind himself. The demonic beast could be seen advancing while letting out a roar.

"You need to sit by and watch that destroy the village. All I need to do is keep you here."

"What? What meaning is there in that?"

Akuto could not help but question that objective.

"Meaning? Even if there was any, I couldn't exactly tell you." Mister X sneered. "At any rate, I can't let you through here."

"You sure are full of yourself for someone who's been hit twice now. I won't kill you, but I'll make sure you can never laugh again."

Akuto took a step forward.

If he did not do anything, the demonic beast would attack the village. He had to break through here before that happened.

But then...

Junko shouted out after looking up toward a sound she had heard up in the air.

"Th-that is...!"

Akuto looked up. He could see his classmates flying through the blue sky. It was all of the students who took pride in their skill with flight magic. They had created a five-man formation. The demonic beast must have been visible from the lodging facility and the teacher must have given them permission to attack.

"So you want this monster to go on a rampage? Well, it looks like that won't happen. The others can handle it," said Akuto.

But when he looked back toward Mister X, the man's attitude had not changed in the slightest. Akuto found his unnatural lack of concern odd.

"Do you have other comrades here?" asked Akuto, but Mister X denied it.

"No. I simply know how this will turn out."

Without turning around, Mister X pointed at the demonic beast with his thumb.

"Ah!" gasped Junko.

The students flying toward it stalled one after another and then began falling to the ground.

"They were shot down? No, their mana..." Akuto quickly realized the demonic beast had absorbed their mana. "Does that demonic beast absorb all mana from its surroundings!?"

"Exactly. No magician can defeat it. It seems the sea cucumbers of this island gain that characteristic when they become a demonic beast. Isn't it truly wonderful? The threat of nature is art!"

"You want to destroy the village that badly? No, wait..."

Akuto's thoughts raced through his head.

—What purpose does he have behind destroying the village? I doubt his goal is the destruction in and of itself. This place wouldn't have any value. In that case, is using a demonic beast his goal? But if it absorbs mana, he can't be controlling it. So if he doesn't want me to approach it...

An answer occurred to Akuto.

"That means I have the power to oppose that monster."

With that realization, he also realized the identity of the strange feeling he had been feeling for a while now.

—I am feeling a kind of sympathy with that monster. I don't want to think about it, but there is some sort of connection between us!

"There is a connection between that monster and me... You want to make it look like I destroyed the village, don't you!?" shouted Akuto in realization.

"Correct." Mister X clapped his hands together. "But if you understand that much, you should just wait obediently here. We are simply advancing the situation in the direction you want. You truly are the demon king. You must accept that fact," said Mister X while grinning.

"To hell with that! I am not a demon king!" denied Akuto, but Mister X was not listening.

"You need to honestly show yourself in your life, but you have yet to realize it. You have not realized the truth hidden deep in your heart. We

are simply helping draw that out. We are making you honest.”

“Don’t act like you understand me.”

Even as he yelled back, Akuto noticed an unpleasant feeling inside him. It was the feeling of realizing something he did not want to realize.

—Either way, someone who wants to set me up as the demon king is behind this. And whoever put together this plan would have needed to know a lot of things ahead of time. Could they predict the future...?

“Who are you working for? With Korone’s dismissal and all the other preparations needed, I can only think the imperial government is involved. Also, the system that predicted I would become a demon king is related to all this too, isn’t it?”

“Do you really think I can answer that? But you have excellent instincts. You will make a wonderful demon king.”

“Shut up! In that case, I’ll just have to get it out of you by force. And I will stop that monster too. Either way, kicking your ass will be easy.”

Akuto charged forward.

“I don’t think so!”

Mister X opened the front of his white coat.

"What?"

"A-a pervert?"

The sudden action surprised Akuto and made Junko blush.

However, what happened next was even more surprising. He wore normal clothes within the white coat, but the inside of the coat was lined with speakers which began producing a great din.

A chaotic collection of metal scraping together, electronic noises, and sampled voices was emitted.

"Noise...?"

"Ha hah hah! That's right! This is my noise music! This is the pinnacle of art and the ultimate music!" proclaimed Mister X confidently as his body began moving as if he was convulsing.

"Cut it out, you pervert!"

Akuto threw a punch toward Mister X. However, the man easily avoided the strike.

"What!?"

Akuto stumbled forward.

“Ha ha ha ha ha hah hah! Did you really think I would fight the demon king without taking some precautions!?”

“What do you-...?”

Akuto tried to confront Mister X, but the man was faster this time. His kick sank into Akuto’s solar plexus.

“Gfh...!”

Akuto writhed in pain and agony. He could not breathe and he could feel his organs convulsing.

—Impossible... I can’t focus my mana...

Normally, Akuto’s body would have been reinforced with mana. No matter how much the man struck him, he would have been perfectly fine.

“This is the noise I have developed as an expert in anti-magician combat.”

“Noise...?”

Akuto looked up.

“Yes. Noises one cannot predict throw one’s heart into disorder. As long

as you are listening to my music, you cannot use magic! No matter how small the magic is, you will be unable to concentrate enough to pull it off!"

Mister X did not go easy on Akuto. He sent another kick toward Akuto's solar plexus. Akuto crossed his arms in front of himself to block it, but the kick immediately shifted to target his face. He was knocked back and his back collapsed on the ground.

"And I love my noise! This is the ultimate music! That means I alone can strengthen my body with magic!"

Akuto was barely able to stand back up, but a roundhouse kick flew toward him as soon as he did. He somehow managed to jump back and out of range, but Mister X continued to spin and sent a back roundhouse kick toward him. This one perfectly caught Akuto in the gut.

"And I have trained in martial arts so I can fight even without magic! When faced with my art, even the demon king can only crawl across the ground!"

As if to make a point that this was the final blow, Mister X put all of his strength into the next kick. Akuto's head collapsed to the ground.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto!"

Keena and Junko shouted out.

Mister X laughed.

"Don't worry! The demon king is the one person I won't kill! I must have this village destroyed and then pin the blame on him! And that means I need to kill everyone who saw me here!"

As Mister X turned to look at Keena and Junko, Junko took a fighting stance with a nervous look.

"Junko-chan..." said Keena worriedly.

"It was always assumed I could use magic, but I have been trained in martial arts more than the average person. I can do this," said Junko.

However, she could not hide the trembling in her legs.

Mister X began walking forward.

"I almost feel sorry for you. I can tell from that stance alone that you can't defeat me. Now, it is not artistic to hurt someone so one-sidedly, but let's do this."

Part 4

Even as Hiroshi sank into the lake, he was still conscious.

—I hate to admit it, but I really was trying to hide my weakness...

Even in this situation, his mind was filled with nothing but regrets targeted toward himself.

He had not grown stronger. In fact, he had wanted to avoid the responsibility growing stronger would have placed on him. In the end, he had used every excuse he could to continually run away.

—Yukiko...

His little sister's face and her words floated up in the back of his mind.

"Onii-chan, you're a hero, right?"

He had denied it because he did not want to be mocked by everyone. He had not wanted to bear such great expectations and responsibility. However, that had betrayed Yukiko's expectations. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he had still betrayed her expectations.

—Aniki...

Akuto's face floated up in his mind.

His expectations for Akuto had all been for his own convenience. He had hoped he could remain weak if he stayed with Akuto. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he had still forced his selfish expectations onto Akuto.

He had believed he was safe if he forced himself into a position below his actual ability. That was what he had done all this time.

And this was the result.

He opened his eyes. Images of the blue lake filled his eyes. The water was quite still.

—Can I really let myself drown here? If I could only swim, I might be able to do something!

Hiroshi struggled.

—I want to swim! I was an idiot to think I didn't need to know how to swim!

As he struggled in pain, Hiroshi realized he had been in this place once before. He was near the entrance to the cave leading to the shrine. He could see the hole leading from the water to the surface.

—Instead of sticking with jobs that didn't require swimming, I should have just learned to swim! And I can do that now! I can still change that

now!

He decided where he needed to go. He desperately paddled at the water and toward the cave. He was beginning to lose consciousness, but the water current helped him. The water was flowing toward the cave.

Once he reached the area of the cave with oxygen, Hiroshi sucked in a deep breath.

He was still alive.

He resolved himself within that dark cave that was only large enough for a single person to pass through.

—I will be reborn. I will grow stronger.

He began to walk.

Everything matched his memories. As he headed through the cave, he saw a light. That proved the cave connected to the outside.

And he found a shrine partway through. It enshrined the stone with the sword stabbed into it as the proof of the hero.

Hiroshi stood before the shrine. It was only as tall as he was. The proof of the hero within was smaller than what one would normally call a sword and the stone was small as well. It looked more like a knife stabbed into a rock.

Hiroshi reached for it. He pulled it. It did not come out. What looked like a normal rock actually sank deep into the ground.

—Can I really not become the hero?

No matter how much strength he used, it would not budge.

—Is deciding to become strong not enough?

Just as he was about to give up, a new thought naturally formed that denied the past thought.

—No, that isn't it. I already am the hero. That's what I need to believe.

He strongly gripped the sword once more.

—I am the hero. I don't become the hero once I pull this out.

He felt the sword come out.

—I already am the hero. I just don't have the power to match yet.

"And I will be getting that power now," muttered Hiroshi.

And a voice responded.

<Authorization complete. Welcome, Brave.>

—Eh?

The voice had clearly come from the sword. It had come from that sword that was no larger than a knife.

"What...?"

Hiroshi was confused and then the knife began to change form in his hand. The blade opened up like a rhinoceros beetle spreading its wings and a mechanical construction could be seen within. As he watched in surprise, it wrapped around his wrist.

"Wah!"

The transformation quickly ended. It had become a bracelet around Hiroshi's wrist.

<I am anti-magic combat unit D13. Please designate an activation command. The default is Brave. If you do not wish to change it, please say "Brave".>

"Brave?"

<Command authorized. Please perform an activation test. Repeat "Brave" as the command.>

To Hiroshi's surprise, he could hear the voice directly in the back of his mind. However, it was subtly different from magical telepathic communications. For one thing, the area should not have held any mana. And his body's internal mana had been absorbed as well.

—Is this the power of the hero? An anti-magic combat unit?

Hiroshi spoke a single word.

"Brave."

<The unit will now activate. Creating dimensional fault. All foreign substances within the space 5 cm from the user will be eliminated.>

With a slight bursting noise, light surrounded Hiroshi's body.

"Wah!"

<Transferring main unit body. Transfer will take 0.2 seconds. Transfer complete.>

Hiroshi had no idea what had happened. However, after an instant of brightness, he realized his vision was surrounded by something translucent.

—It's like there's a visor over my eyes.

As soon as he realized he now had a helmet on his head, particles of light displayed on the visor before his eyes. They formed words. He could see a translucent display floating before his eyes.

<Electrical components functioning normal. Life support system functioning normal. Outside air circulation mode selected. Activation of nuclear fusion engine awaiting mental input.>

The words he heard in the back of his mind were the same as the ones floating before his eyes.

—So am I wearing some kind of suit?

To check on that, Hiroshi walked outside and looked at his reflection in the surface of the lake.

He was wearing a helmet that left his mouth visible. No one would recognize him while he was wearing it. He appeared to be wearing a skintight riding suit, but he had no clue what material it was made of. Parts bulged out at the wrists and they had a few holes on them.

—Are these weapons?

He held his hand in front of his face. It looked dangerous as if it had weapons built within. He twisted his head around and saw another weapon-like bulge on his back.

—What is this?

When he thought that, the voice spoke once more.

<Displaying the manual. For help, send mental input to the dolphin in the bottom right.>

The words displayed themselves on the screen. This time, a dolphin character appeared in the bottom right.

—That thing looks annoying.

As soon as he thought that, the dolphin disappeared.

<To activate the weaponry, the nuclear fusion engine must be activated. To activate the nuclear fusion engine, please provide mental input.>

—I see. Mental input means I just have to think and it will act. And the nuclear fusion engine must be...

<This unit can function in areas without mana. It can also absorb and destroy mana. It is guaranteed to be useful in anti-magic combat.>

—It's an isolated unit that doesn't need mana!

Hiroshi was excited.

—With this, I can handle that perverted man and that demonic beast!

Part 5

"...It is not artistic to hurt someone so one-sidedly, but let's do this," said Mister X as he approached Junko and the others.

His coat was still open.

Junko took a fighting stance while sweat beaded on her forehead.

"Junko-chan," said Keena worriedly.

It was blatantly obvious that she could not win, but she put on a strong front.

"Shut up! I do not want to die while he is watching. I do not want either of us to die!"

Keena understood that "he" referred to Akuto. She gave a powerful nod. Akuto must have heard their conversation because he stood up behind Mister X.

"Don't you dare turn your attention elsewhere while I can still move," he said.

Mister X turned around and laughed happily.

"You did it! This was unexpected! Everything unexpected is wonderful

art!"

"If you love unexpected things so much, don't work according to a plan. I don't know what all has been set up with these predictions and whatnot, but I have a message for your superior," said Akuto quietly as he took a fighting pose.

"I don't like predictions either. Even so, I have to do this. Even so, there are some uncertain elements mixed in and chaos is coming. That isn't gonna make me happy!" Mister X grinned. "Now, you've managed to stand, but do you have a countermeasure? I hope you'll let me enjoy this. After all, I can't finish you off."

Hearing that, Akuto covered his ears with his hands.

"Hah hah! An excellent idea! Do you think you can win if you can't hear my noise?"

Mister X advanced toward Akuto and threw a kick, but Akuto was unable to block it. He was knocked back and his hands were knocked from his ears.

"Gh!"

"Just not hearing it isn't enough! My noise is also a vibration you can feel in your entire body! That is the sign of top-rate noise! I can produce my noise without making any sound! You must have felt it! In the forest last night, I made a copy of the characteristic vibration of your internal mana!"

While swinging his legs around, Mister X began a bizarre convulsing dance. He bent his body, cried out, and spun around.

—I see. That's what that headache last night was.

Akuto recalled what had happened when he had gotten Yukiko involved. That had been Mister X's doing. But even if he understood that now, the problem lay elsewhere.

—Dammit. Is there nothing I can do about this?

Akuto lay on the ground and stared up into the sky. He could see the demonic beast rampaging out of the corner of his eye. Distant screams of the villagers were mixed in with the annoying noise. The demonic beast was likely crushing the village. He could see flames below it. The village likely had skillful fighters, but they could do nothing while they could not use their mana. His classmates had likely fled. The demonic beast rampaged without restraint and caused as much destruction as possible. It was like looking at an image of hell. And part of the blame lay on his shoulders.

—As long as I can still move, I need to do something.

Akuto tried to move his fingers and succeed. He knew he had to do something, but he did not have the strength left to stand.

—But there's nothing I can do even if I could stand.

He had to think up a plan first, but the noise prevented him from concentrating. His irritation continued to grow. The surrounding destruction, the irritation of being unable to do anything, and the fear all made him want to scream.

Mister X seemed to have once more chosen Junko and Keena as his targets. Akuto could see the pervert slowly approaching them.

—I need to protect those two no matter what. Keena approached me normally despite everyone calling me a demon king and Junko actually understands me. I can't afford to lose them.

Despite Mister X trying to kill them, Keena and Junko both looked more worried about Akuto.

As he saw their expressions, a sudden idea came to him.

—That's it!

"Wait."

Akuto stood up.

Mister X turned around in surprise.

"You can still stand!? But this is growing annoying. A refrain of the same phrase is not noise! And that means it isn't art!"

"Heh heh... Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha..."

Akuto's shoulders shook as he began laughing.

"What?" said Mister X suspiciously.

But Akuto's laugh only grew.

"Hyaa hah hah ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Wh-why are you laughing!?"

Mister X started to look panicked.

After laughing some more, a fearless grin appeared on Akuto's lips.

"I understand what this noise you speak of is. It's your music and the cry of your soul."

"Th-that's true, but what does it matter if you understand?"

"It means I can act without issue as long the cry of my soul is greater than yours," boldly declared Akuto.

But the look of panic disappeared from Mister X's face. A smile of relief replaced it before he began sneering at Akuto.

"If that was enough to get rid of my noise, I would never bother with this! Countless people have said the same thing just before I defeated them! My noise is unpredictable!"

"What does it matter if it's unpredictable? Predictable or not, I just have to drown it out with my own voice! I don't know if you should call me a demon king or not, but I know who I am. I will not concede any more ground where that's concerned. If I don't like something, I'll knock it out of my way. And I really don't like you."

Akuto began to advance.

"It's no use! Drown in a sea of noise!"

Mister X sent a few kicks toward Akuto. Every single one struck Akuto. In fact, Akuto did not even try to avoid them.

"I will destroy you and bury you in the earth! No matter how much you beg or cry, that is what I have decided!" shouted Akuto.

The look on Mister X's face changed. The sensation coming from his leg was clearly not right. Akuto's body felt harder than metal.

"You can control your magic power!?"

"That's right! I should thank you. Those cries of your heart taught me the truth. But that doesn't mean I won't kick your ass!"

Akuto spoke so loudly his entire body vibrated and that negated the noise.

"Tchhhh!"

Mister X raised the volume of his noise, but Akuto only began shouting even louder.

"Just give it up! I will beat you to the ground for every time you kicked me!"

Akuto's strike slammed into Mister X's face.

The man rotated through the air before his back slammed into the ground.

"Gahaah!"

Mister X let out a painful gasp, but once he began breathing again, he began laughing while lying on his back.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I'm so glad you understand art. But whatever you might say, I am working for a greater goal. That goal is the greatest form of art. I'm sure you'll love it! It is war and war and war! That is the ultimate representation of art. All art that reverberates in the heart will produce war. As the demon king, you have always been that type of person. Even if you try to escape the destiny set up for you, you cannot

change how you live your life. Most dictators throughout history have been charming geniuses who understood art. You are the same sort of person! Without even realizing it, you will send those around you to be sacrificed! Even now, you sacrifice a girl every time you try to force your way of thinking! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Mister X's words had likely been the last resort of a man who had accepted his defeat. However, they were enough to shake Akuto's resolve.

"Enough nonsense!" shouted Akuto, but his voice lacked the willpower from before.

While still lying collapsed on the ground, Mister X saw through that.

"I see. So that's your weak point. Not only do I have my noise, but I have the advantage in psychological warfare."

Mister X raised his head.

Mister X's words had reminded Akuto of Korone.

—Someone had to make a sacrifice because of me...

As Akuto stopped moving, the effects of the noise took hold once more. Mister X stood up and attacked. Akuto's punch must have done a fair bit of damage because the attack lacked the force from before, but it was still more than Akuto could withstand. Akuto fell to a crouch.

Seeing that, Junko shouted, "Stop! I will face you!"

But her legs were trembling as she spoke.

Mister X shrugged as if he had had enough of dealing with them.

"I need to be leaving soon, so let's keep this simple. It may not be art, but I have no choice."

Mister X pulled an incantation gun from the pocket of his white coat. Junko could not use magic, so the weapon would be fatal against her.

Junko stood in front of Keena and Keena curled up while covering Yukiko.

When Akuto saw what was happening, he raised his head and shouted out.

"Stop!"

"Not doing what you tell me to is the true essence of noise."

Mister X pulled the trigger.

With the sound of the gun firing, the bullet flew toward Junko. The bullet contained explosion magic, so it burst before Junko and the others' eyes and flames swallowed them up.

Akuto let out a voiceless cry.

But...

"Simply pathetic. You truly cannot do anything without me around," said an unconcerned voice as if from nowhere.

"Wha-...Who was that?" asked Mister X in confusion.



Akuto recognized the voice.

"K-Korone... You came back?"

"Yes, I have returned."

Korone suddenly appeared from amid the flames. With a single wave of the cloak-like cloth she held, the flames and smoke disappeared. Junko and the others were curled up and unharmed behind Korone.

"With this disaster prevention cloak on hand, you can rest easy," announced Korone as she held the disaster prevention cloak up above her head.

"Korone!"

"Korone-chan...!"

When Junko and Keena called out to her, Korone turned around and expressionlessly gave the V-sign.

"To make a long story short, I have returned after making a plea bargain." Korone then pointed toward Mister X. "CIMO 8 member codenamed Mister X. Your current actions are unrelated to those of the intelligence director. Ergo, I can act as Sai Akuto's observer by neutralizing you in order to protect him."

"That incantation bullet should have been enough to shoot straight through a L'Isle-Adam's head! How are you unharmed!?" asked Mister X in surprise.

"I am a special model," she said as she walked toward Mister X.

Mister X spread the front of his coat and sent his noise pouring over Korone.

"It is no use. That has no effect on me."

Korone continued toward Mister X.

"Tch!"

Mister X sent one of his prided kicks at Korone.

"It is no use." She blocked it with one hand. "I could handle this myself, but I think that should be Akuto-san's job."

Korone pulled a new tool out of her bag. She held the rod up high.

"Magical Bat! At first glance it looks like a normal metal bat, but it is actually a normal metal bat."

"What...?" said Akuto with a bitter grin, but that grin had regained its calm. "I don't need any tools. Just having you back has helped enough."

"I will explain everything later, but let me say one thing now. I never felt any painful emotions due to you. Nor will I ever."

"Now that I've heard that, I will be okay." Akuto had Korone step back as he stood before Mister X. "Let's continue this. I can't just leave this to a girl."

Akuto grinned and Mister X must have decided this was his last chance. He let out that bizarre cry once more and turned his noise to maximum output.

Akuto and Mister X clashed with jabs and kicks.

But the man was no match for Akuto now that he had gained the concentration to negate the noise.

Finally, the time came to put an end to Mister X's noise.

Akuto's strike slammed into Mister X's gut. He stopped shouting and the noise stopped from the speakers.

"I have lost... That was an excellent display of art. However, our plan was essentially a success. The villagers will spread fear of the demon king and you will ultimately be driven from the academy. Once that happens, you must choose between death and rebelling against the empire," said Mister X intermittently.

"That won't be a problem. After all, I'm not alone," said Akuto as he looked over at Korone and the others.

"Keh... You lady killer..."

With that last comment, Mister X collapsed.

"It is over."

Akuto looked up as Korone approached.

When he saw the look in her eyes, he finally relaxed. At the same time, embarrassing feelings welled up within him.

"S-so you managed to come back."

"Yes."

Korone nodded and her expression seemed to contain some joy.

"U-umm..."

Akuto was unsure what to say and Korone nodded again as if to say she understood everything.

"But before greeting me, you need to deal with that."

Korone pointed toward the demonic beast.

—That's right. That thing is still there.

Akuto watched as the demonic beast destroyed the village. It spewed what looked like bundles of white strings from the top of its cylindrical body. Those were its insides. It was not shaped like a sea cucumber for nothing. However, unlike a sea cucumber, the buildings struck by those

insides began to dissolve along with them. It also seemed the regeneration rate of its insides was much greater than normal. It would spew more insides almost right away.

“Th-that thing...” said Junko in fear.

Yukiko began to cry as her hometown was destroyed and Keena tried to comfort her.

“We must hurry,” said Korone.

Akuto nodded, but then he saw what looked like a shooting star cut across the daytime sky, moving toward the demonic beast.

—What is that?

Whatever it was, it was definitely headed through the sky for the demonic beast.

Part 6

<Output is displayed in the gauge at the top left. If the energy transfer is too poor, the system must be reactivated. The main body battery holds enough energy for five minutes of flight time.>

As Hiroshi listened to that explanation, he began to realize that this suit was not a creation of a magical civilization. Unlike with mana, he could not feel power welling up in his body. While flying by controlling the mana of the atmosphere, it would feel like he was riding the wind. However, he now felt weightless as if he had been freed from gravity. Yet the overall style of the suit and the fact that it had clearly been created for a human to use made him doubt it had been created by some truly foreign civilization. He felt it may have been something researched before civilization began to assume everyone could use mana.

—How much power does this thing have?

Hiroshi had to wonder. Because he could not feel the power welling up within him, he could not instinctually judge his combat ability. But with the demonic beast below him destroying the village, he knew he had to do something.

—Can I really do this? I guess I have to try.

He had been planning to pursue the perverted man first, but the demonic beast was just about to crush his family's house. He could not just ignore that. His parents had moved away from the house and were firing a shotgun at the demonic beast. Needless to say, the gun was showing no sign of affecting the demonic beast at all.

Hiroshi accelerated in that direction. The suit had the ability to perform whatever action he imagined in his head. As the suit flew weightlessly, the distance between him and the demonic beast disappeared in no time at all.

—This thing's fast!

And he barely felt any burden on his own body.

—I can do this.

"Does this thing have any weapons?"

A voice answered Hiroshi's question.

<The right hand possesses a high frequency blade. By limiting the vibration, it can also be used as an anti-personnel striking weapon. It is recommended for non-lethally neutralizing a target you wish to capture. The left hand possesses a monomolecular cutter. It can be used to slice through non-living things. It should only be used against a living thing if you intend to take the target's life. This weapon also must be transferred in from the main body in another dimension. The back contains six lasers. Each one can be fired individually. Energy for all six shots must be transferred in simultaneously. One minute is needed before they can be fired again. That covers the standard equipment. For further options, please view the following link.>

"I get the gist of it."

Hiroshi flew across in front of the demonic beast. He was trying to draw its attention. He did not know where its eyes were, so he simply cut by in the direction he had been approaching from.

And it seemed the demonic beast noticed him. Its cylindrical body twisted around to point its head toward him.

—Yes, this way!

Hiroshi was satisfied that he had successfully lured the demonic beast. He glanced down toward his parents. His mother looked shocked, but his father did not. He was looking up at Hiroshi with a somehow calm expression.

—He knew something, didn't he?

However, Hiroshi did not have time to think on that. The demonic beast spewed its white string-like insides from its mouth.

—There!

Hiroshi avoided them. He was amazed how well the suit carried out the actions he pictured in his head.

—I could get used to this!

The insides moved around like independent life forms and pursued

Hiroshi with almost entirely unpredictable movements, but the footage displayed on his visor covered the area behind him as well. Once he realized the area behind him was displayed like a rearview mirror, he managed to picture an image of the entire area 360 degrees around him. He could see the movements of the insides, so he could avoid them. The suit also seemed to have the ability to automatically avoid the ones that approached more quickly. At some point, he had avoided a few of the insides he had not noticed. To those below, he guessed he looked like a line of light weaving through the gaps between the tentacle-like insides.

—Laser!

As soon as Hiroshi thought it, a glowing laser fired behind him from his back. It bent around like a snake raising its head in preparation to strike and then shot straight toward the demonic beast.

The demonic beast roared. A scorched area appeared over the leopard pattern on its skin and smoke rose up as its bodily fluids evaporated. Another laser swept across sideways, opening the wound further. The insides in the horizontally sweeping path of the laser were sliced apart and fell to the ground with smoke rising from them.

—Amazing!

Hiroshi was excited. But an instant later, he cooled down his own excitement.

—No, getting carried away isn't going to help. A mistake here could cause a lot of damage.

The demonic beast writhed in pain. This caused it to damage Hiroshi's family house. More insides fell and began dissolving other nearby houses.

—I need to end this right away.

"Are there any weapons for destroying large objects?"

<This unit has two types of anti-materiel weapons. Both are special options. The first is the nuclear fusion bomb. It can be transferred in and equipped. It will leave nothing but scorched earth in a radius of three kilometers. Please escape beyond three kilometers within five seconds of dropping it. It is recommended you drop it from three kilometers in the air. Any life forms within a five kilometer radius that do not have radiation shielding will also be in danger.>

"What's the other one?"

"High temperature plasma balls. Plasma is compressed in a field to form balls. The balls are expanded around the suit and as soon as they come into contact with the target, the field is released and the target is melted. This weapon cannot be used with the suit's battery, so five minutes are needed before it may be used again.>



"Let's go with that one."

<Transferring heat-resistance cape.>

An instant later, a cape that looked like it was made of cloth appeared around the suit.

<Transferring plasma balls.>

Spheres of light appeared around the cloak. It seemed he simply had to bring those spheres to the enemy.

—In other words, I just have to charge into it like this.

Hiroshi looked down at the demonic beast writhing below. If he could fly in as if he was piercing straight through it, it seemed he could melt that sea cucumber monster using heat.

—Let's do this.

Hiroshi brought the suit up into the air and then reversed to accelerate down toward the demonic beast.

The cape flipped up behind him and the plasma balls began rotating around it. Finally, Hiroshi became a mass of fiercely rotating energy.

<Plasma ball fixation field in excellent condition. Time between contact and release set at one nanosecond. Lowering anti-flash visor's visible light passage rate from the current 23% to less than 1%. Expanding dimensional fault field. Contact with target in five seconds.>

He was rapidly approaching the demonic beast, but he was mysteriously without fear.

—So this is what it is like to have power.

That is what Hiroshi thought.

He became a mass of energy, charged down the demonic beast's mouth, and shot back up into the air not even a few seconds later. Hiroshi turned around to find the demonic beast had burst from the inside. Without even time to give one last roar, it evaporated and became a brown mass.

—With this, I can easily handle anyone!

Hiroshi felt a chill run down his spine. This power was clearly too much for him.

But...

—I can easily protect anyone now!

He looked down. The villagers were obviously exhausted as they looked up at him with a strange mixture of shock and relief. From that look, it was clear none of them had realized this mysterious flying hero was Hiroshi.

They were all thankful he had saved them but were also concerned about who the hero might be. Hiroshi felt he had to say something.

<To protect the suit's wearer, your voice can be altered.>

The suit must have read his thoughts because the support voice spoke up.

After a bit of hesitation, Hiroshi waved toward the villagers and called out to them.

"I am Brave, the legendary hero."

Despite being so far away, Akuto grasped what had happened. Someone who could fly despite not having any mana around had defeated the demonic beast.

"What was that?" asked Akuto to no one in particular.

Naturally, no one had an answer.

Junko, Keena, and even Korone could only watch on in shock.

"Could that have been the legendary hero?" muttered Junko.

Akuto could not deny the possibility.

"But does that mean the prediction was true?"

And in the next moment, something happened that left Akuto

speechless as well. The hero flew toward them through the sky.

As the hero flew weightlessly, he landed in front of Akuto and the others.

It was a man wearing a helmet and a skintight bodysuit. He was short, but he had already demonstrated how powerful he was. Akuto's body tensed up.

"Who are you?" asked Akuto, but the hero did not answer.

As soon as the hero's gaze reached where Mister X was lying collapsed behind Akuto, the hero disappeared from Akuto's vision.

"Eh?"

Akuto checked around him, but it was too late by the time he found the hero again. The hero kicked Mister X high up into the air. Mister X was still breathing, but he had been left completely powerless. He now flew high into the sky.

—Not good!

Akuto tried to stop it, but there was nothing he could do. In the next instant, the hero disappeared from the surface of the earth. He was now floating in the air next to Mister X. The hero then kicked Mister X to the side. Mister X flew far into the distance.

A distant splash was heard, so Mister X had likely landed in the ocean.

—Did he kill him?

Akuto instinctually felt that had been the intent.

“What are you doing!?”

Anger instantaneously welled up within him. Akuto disliked killing no matter the reason.

Akuto took long strides toward the hero when he landed once more.

Akuto and the hero glared at each other.

As Junko watched on, she panicked because she had never felt this atmosphere before. For better or for worse, the tension between Akuto and the people he had fought before had been a heated one in which one sent everything at one's opponent. However, the tension between these two was a chilled one that made it seem something truly irreversible would be done if a fight broke out.

“Why did you attack him?” asked Akuto.

“I gained this power out of my desire to protect everyone. If I did not eliminate him, I could not protect this island,” replied the hero.

Akuto felt an intense opposition to those words.

"You're wrong. There had to be a better way."

After that, the two continued to face each other silently.

"Ah!" cried Yukiko after staring blankly at them up to that point.

She had realized who the hero was from his body shape, his mannerisms, and his actions. However, that voice caused the tension between the two of them to burst. Akuto and the hero's right fists crossed.

A dry sound rang out.

Akuto's right fist was blocked by the hero's left hand.

The hero's right fist was blocked by Akuto's left hand.

Eventually, both of them moved back.

The hero silently floated upwards. And as Akuto watched on, he flew up and disappeared into the blue sky.

—Is it...over?

Akuto looked at the others. Junko and Keena were showing looks of

relief. Korone stood next to them. The only person missing was Hiroshi.

—Don't tell me he's actually dead...

As soon as that thought entered Akuto's mind, he heard a voice he had thought he might never hear again.

"Anikiii! Yukikooo!"

Akuto looked over.

Hiroshi was running toward them waving his hand.

"Onii-chan!"

A broad smile spread across Yukiko's face. She ran out toward Hiroshi.

"You're alive. Thank goodness."

Akuto watched Hiroshi and Yukiko hug as he sat down on the ground in relief.

Korone then moved in front of him. She lent a hand to help Akuto up and then wrapped her arms around Akuto's waist in an embrace.

"It was not easy getting back here, you know?" she said with upturned eyes.

Her tone of voice contained a hint of teasing, but Akuto guessed that was simply meant to hide her embarrassment.

"I know. You want me to praise you, don't you?"

Akuto placed a hand on Korone's head.

Chapter 5: The Trouble Still Isn't Over?

"That was amazing! I wonder who it was!"

Keena spoke excitedly with Yukiko on the way back to the village.

Yukiko looked back at Keena with a look in her eyes that said, "Does she really not know?" It seemed Keena really did not know.

Hiroshi returned to the village along with Yukiko and Keena. He had brought Keena as well because he thought she might have realized his secret, but it seemed that had been an unnecessary concern. He wanted to keep the suit a secret from those in the school.

Hiroshi faced his parents in front of their destroyed house.

"Dad..."

When Hiroshi approached, his father left Yukiko and Keena with Hiroshi's mother and brought Hiroshi behind the destroyed house. After being sure that no one was listening, he took Hiroshi's hand.

"That was you, wasn't it?"

Hiroshi silently nodded and his father began telling him a secret.

"That was left by your grandfather. He is also the one who left the legend. However, not even he knew the details. A man who mysteriously

appeared on the island left the suit and legend with him and then disappeared. The man told him someone from his bloodline would eventually use the suit. I also saw the suit when I was younger, so I had no choice but to believe it.”

“But doesn’t that mean someone with actual predictive ability was behind this?” asked Hiroshi in confusion.

“I don’t know. After all, real precognition is supposed to be impossible. I do not know if that man randomly chose our family or if there really is a bloodline of the hero. But given how dangerous that suit is, I had no choice but to continue protecting the legend. This will probably put a burden on you, but you are now the only one who can use it. It is up to you to decide how you use it.”

Having said that, Hiroshi’s father saw him off.

Even when asked by the people of the island, Hiroshi’s father never admitted that Hiroshi was the hero. Eventually, the villagers stopped asking, but they also stopped mocking Hiroshi behind his back.

When Yukiko arrived to say goodbye before Hiroshi returned to the academy, she looked like she wanted to say something. Hiroshi rubbed her head and told her, “Keep it a secret.” That seemed to get his point across.

But Hiroshi was not in a good mood. It bothered him that he had been forced into a conflict with Akuto over how to deal with Mister X. First of all, this power was too much for him. There was also the prediction. It said the hero would ultimately defeat the demon king.

—That will never actually happen. After all, I just have to never fight aniki.

Hiroshi tried to brush away his gloomy mood with that thought.

But one thing still bothered him: his father had told him the name of the man who had brought the suit to the island.

Apparently, that man's name was Yamato Bouichirou.

"...and that is how I managed to return."

After they returned to the lodging facility, Korone had explained everything. Hiroshi was still visiting his family with Keena. Only Korone, Akuto, and Junko were in Akuto's room.

The situation could be summed up as follows: Korone had learned of the rumors concerning the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office, so she had realized who was attacking Akuto in the forest. She had gone to the Cabinet Office and used that information to threaten the intelligence director who was her superior. The intelligence director had been unaware of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office's actions. He had seen no option but to apologize and reinstate Korone and the Church of Markt's right to observe Akuto.

"It seems someone was controlling the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office from the shadows. This is quite a problem, so some more political

bargaining like this will likely be held in secret."

Akuto had not understood most of what she had said, but it seemed different parts of the government were arguing whether the commotions caused by Akuto were a political matter or a matter of public order.

However, that alone did not explain how Korone had been acting in the forest.

"Then why were you dismissed in the first place?" he asked.

Korone nodded and replied, "Most of this was resolved, but one matter still remains."

"Eh?"

"From what I was told in the Cabinet Office, it seems you have learned what I was ordered to do. From what I was told, the academy made an official protest. It must have leaked via Etou-san."

"Then the whole seduction thing is over?"

"That is not yet over. I still have my orders and I do not intend to change my plans."

"Eh?" Akuto could not help but be surprised by this. "But if I know about it, it will never work."

When Korone heard that, she asked a question.

"Are you sure you are not making some sort of misunderstanding?"

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes. The plan is to control you with a woman. Even if it has been revealed, you only need to be interested in the individual," said Korone seriously.

"But I've already told you I will not be interested in you when I know it's for this," said Akuto.

Korone immediately rebutted with, "That is the misunderstanding. I was only attempting to sexually educate you as you know little about having a relationship with a woman. I am not the intended partner."

"What?"

Akuto was left speechless.

Korone went on to say, "The plan was to have you marry someone from an excellent family. Now that it has been revealed, I will ask you directly. Akuto-san, please marry Junko-san. A marriage interview can be prepared for you next month."

"Wha-...?"

“Eh...?”

Both Akuto and Junko’s expressions stiffened. Whether she had noticed this or not, Korone continued speaking.

“From your actions in the forest, I thought you were in love with Keena-san, so I thought I had failed. Keena-san is not from an important family, so a relationship with her would not change the current situation. However, it seems that has advanced no further. In that case, I must ask you to marry Junko-san and join her family. That will resolve everything. If you cannot forget Keena-san, then you can take her as a mistress. You will likely be allowed that much freedom.”

Korone sounded completely calm as she said such outrageous things.

Akuto was still confused, but he quickly realized the meaning behind all of Korone’s strange actions.

—But...

He glanced over at Junko. For some reason, she was sitting seiza style with her mouth pressed tightly in a single straight line. As soon as she noticed he was looking at her, her mouth began twitching as if it was convulsing.

“H-hey, could you stop saying such ridiculous things?” Akuto said.

Junko then began mumbling and nonsensical words escaped her lips.

"Hyah...hyoh...nyoh...M-m-marriage?"

Junko looked over at Akuto, looked like she had no idea what to say, suddenly screamed, and ran out of the room.

"W-w-waaahhh!"

"W-wait!"

Akuto was unable to stop her.

After fleeing, Junko sat worrying alone in front of the vending machine corner of the café room.

—Marriage? M-m-m-m-m-m-marriage?

She had never even considered it. The Hattori family usually risked their lives serving VIPs of the country, so very few of them had happy households. The eldest child would be given a political marriage and the other children would normally give everything they had to some important person. And when the important person who became their master was of the opposite sex, it could only become a perverted relationship of patiently enduring their love. And the household teachings of the Hattori family instructed them to do so.

It was true that Junko would unintentionally begin thinking about Akuto

before going to sleep at night, but her standard fantasy was a twisted one of feeling she was protecting Akuto while hiding under his bed to feel his body heat as he slept.

—If I marry him, I will not be under his bed. I will be lying next to him. N-next to him...

Junko was feeling horribly shaken, so she bought a drink to help calm herself down. While breathing heavily, she drank down the contents of the paper cup all at once.

—No, married couples do more than just lie next to each other.. They go beyond that by-...

Junko began choking on the drink and writhed about atop her chair for a full five minutes.

The classmates watching her from afar assumed she was troubled because Akuto had done something else that would hurt the academy's reputation.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do now?"

After Junko had fled, Akuto complained to Korone.

But Korone remained calm.

"This will resolve everything. Is there a problem?"

"Well...what about our feelings?"

When Akuto asked that exceedingly natural question, Korone suddenly smiled.

—Eh?

This caught Akuto off guard.

"I have feelings, too. However, I am able to suppress them," she said.

Her expression was a lively one filled with emotion.

Akuto was left speechless and Korone brought a hand up to her mouth. She then blushed and fidgeted as if she was having difficulty saying something.

"These orders are hard for me too. After all, I really do lo-..."

Korone's expression was one of a girl in love. Akuto was so shocked he froze in place and Korone brought her face in towards his. She stuck her lips out slightly and brought them in toward his.



And just before their lips touched...

"So this is the sort of approach you like," spoke Korone coldly as she returned to her usual expressionless look.

"Wait... You were teasing me!?"

Akuto blushed and stood up.

Expression returned to Korone's face as she smiled.

"Heh heh heh... Just a little joke."

Her smile was all too natural.

Akuto had no idea what to do other than forgive her.

Afterword

Thank you for coming back once more. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. As I write this afterword, it is the middle of summer. It's so hot I am drinking chilled amazake as I write this. This is another type of rice juice.

Here is Volume 3. I think it is in a large part thanks to Itou-san's illustrations, but this series has become rather popular. That has allowed me to bring plenty of developments into the story. I apologize to those picking this book up at a later date, but a manga version starts serialization in Champion RED (published by Akita Shoten) starting with the issue released in September of 2008. It is being written by Itou Souichi-san himself. This is a manga version by the illustrator of the original, so even I could not be more excited. I have been rolling around in my room wishing the days could go by quicker. Then again, Itou-san will have a harder time of it if the days do go by quicker, so I need to start rolling around more slowly.

There is also something else in the works that I cannot announce yet. Depending on the time you are reading this, it might have already been announced, but please look forward to it.

Now, time to discuss something pointless.

While writing this novel, I was listening to noise music. I can only describe it as amazing. Screams and electronic noises that I cannot describe in text were blaring from the speakers. It was of course quite annoying, but when I put up with it long enough, I actually started to grow sleepy. When you listen to most songs, you follow the rhythm in

your head, but you can't do that with noise. With noise that you cannot comprehend, your brain gives up trying to listen to it and you grow sleepy. Out of curiosity, I watched footage of a concert. It had the amazing description of "due to exhaustion from the shouting and intense movements, the concert can last no longer than five minutes". They really did convulse and jump about. I tried to copy it and hurt my neck. I assumed the noise musician had to be fine because he trains for it, but I checked on some information on the artist and he said it hurts him too. Noise music is dangerous!

Anyway, I was impressed by the noise, so I would like to write a noise light novel one day. Something that could last no longer than five pages. But I can't think up anything I could write, so I get the feeling that "one day" will never come.

Now, about the novel.

Then again, this is yet another one that needs no explanation. I do have a warning though: "Don't try the actions depicted in this novel at home." Specifically, don't try to make the rice juice or do any of the perverted actions. Either one will get you arrested. You say you would never do anything perverted? Yes, I supposed you wouldn't. But there must be some types of perverted actions people just want to do outside. The other day, I saw an elementary school kid walking through a stream shouting obscene words. He might become something like a mudskipper in the future.

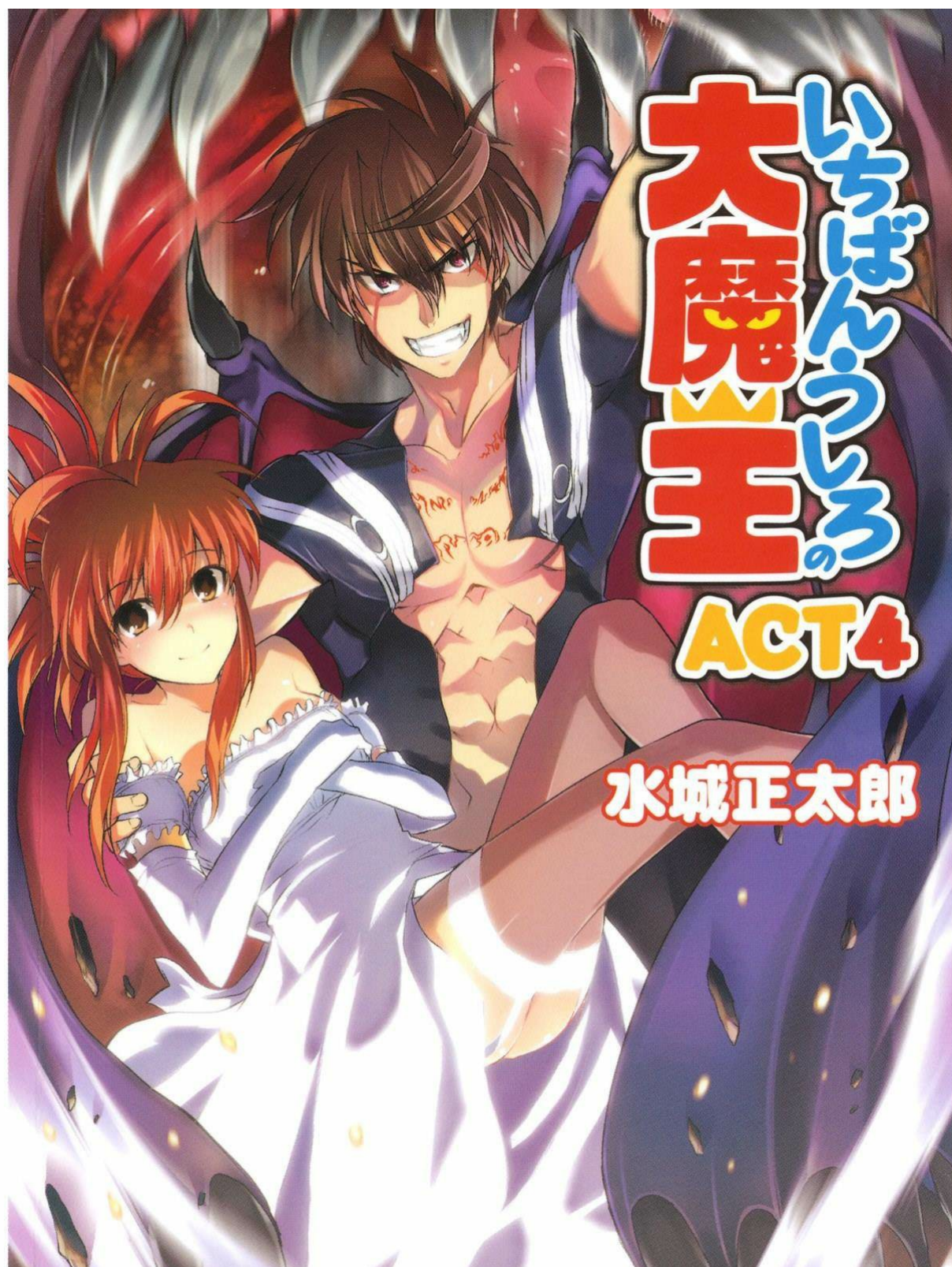
I know it's weird coming after that, but it's time to thank people.

First, my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. I know you're probably really busy now, but keep up the fight together. This time, Korone's expressions were especially great. I'm the one that came up with her personality yet even I couldn't help but be surprised she says such vulgar things with those expressions. Then again, there are elementary school kids who shout things while walking through a stream, so I suppose you can't judge vulgarity on looks alone. (Did I really just say that!?)

Next, my editor Ohashi-san. Once more, thank you for all your effort. I hope I can finish the next one with more time to spare. When people ask me if I intend to say that over and over again, I will answer no. Oddly enough, though, the work always takes so much time to complete. I will continue working while praying I will get faster at it. Some of you may have realized that I just said the exact same thing as in Volume 2. I am the embodiment of the author who never improves, but please do not abandon me.

Lastly, I give my thanks to everyone else involved. You have helped me in so many ways.

Now then, it looks like we can enjoy this together a lot longer!



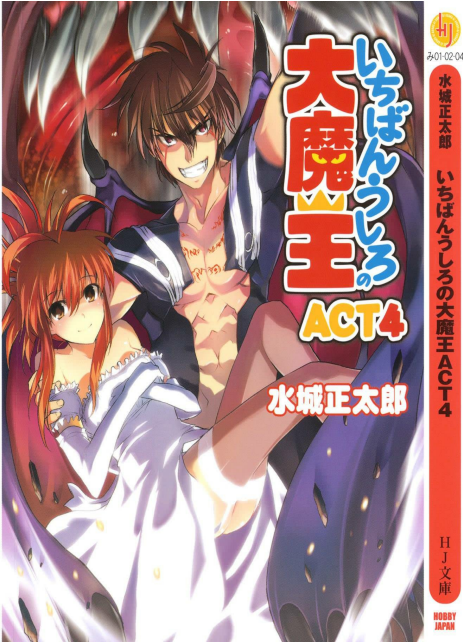
水城正太郎 みずきしょうたろう

水城正太郎：『東京タフボイド』シリーズ（国本賢三スクリュー文庫）、『せんすいかん』シリーズ（HJ文庫）。『たびーデータ』を経て、現在ライター集団「A-T-EAM」主催。イニーイ、新進ホオル君でる？ 素は廻りに負けたので、彼の事件を応援するふたになりました。富士屋ファンタジア文庫で『水の国、風の国物語』シリーズは絶賛発売中ですよ！あわせて読んでね。ちなみに本書はHJ文庫で間違いないですね。

伊藤宗一 いとうそういち

兵庫県在住のイラストレーター兼漫画家。一般向けから成年向けまで幅広く活動中。経物は、熱血・熱肉・熱入・エロ・熱、＜＝＞。水城先生との対談での夢が叶いました。ジジイの魂、ごちそうさまでした。

カバーイラスト／伊藤宗一 装丁／西村 大




9784894257948

ISBN978-4-89425-794-8
C0193 ¥619E


1920193006193

定価：本体619円＋税



お見合いだということを理解できずに、駒子の故郷・伊賀を訪れることになった阿九斗。しかしお見合いの最中、学院に残ったけーなに暗殺者の魔の手が迫る。暗殺指令の出自は？ 突然学院に姿を現した大和望一部の目的は？ そして暗殺指令を知った阿九斗が固めた決意とは？ 衝撃の展開を見せるラブコメ&バトル第4弾。

HOBBY JAPAN

- 水城正太郎 作品
- せんすいかん その1
 - せんすいかん その2
 - せんすいかん その3
 - せんすいかん まとめ
 - いちばんうしろの大魔王
 - いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2
 - いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT3
 - いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT4

いちばんうしろ
大魔王
ACT4



阿九斗様！

そんな忌まわしい力まで
使おうというのか！



—僕は、

神を……殺す。



待っていた!

この時を待っていたぞ、
主よ!



登場人物紹介

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ポシェットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。

そが
曾我けーな

落ちこぼれた天然少女。阿九斗に懐いている。物語の鍵を握る人物？

さいあく
紗伊阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると予言された「善良な」主人公。膨大な魔力を有するが融通が利かない。

がくいんちよう
学院長

コンスタン魔術学院の学院長。謎多き老人。魔王が起こした前大戦の経験者。



えとうふじこ
江藤不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師にして薬物使い。阿九斗たちの先輩で女子寮長を勤める。

はっとりじゅんに
服部 絢子

阿九斗のことが気になる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘。

しらいし
リライ白石

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。阿九斗と魔王の件に関して独自路線を歩む。

みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメーカー。伝説の勇者という顔も持つ。



Prologue

Even at a young age, Sai Akuto had felt somehow out of sync with the world.

He was an orphan. That alone had a good chance of giving him a personality that did not adapt to his surroundings well, but with Akuto, it came from a more fundamental aspect of his personality.

A gentleman had once visited the orphanage he lived in. The gentleman's appearance was more than enough to know he came from an excellent family and was financially wealthy, but he showed no hint of being prideful about it. His speech made it abundantly clear that he had a personality overflowing with kindness and it seemed that donating money for orphans was a natural thing for him.

"I just so happened to be passing by when I learned this is an orphanage. I could hardly ignore it. If it is not a bother, I would like to make a donation."

Akuto was the one receiving the gentleman who smiled and removed his hat. Akuto was a precocious child who was known for being too clever for his age, so the teachers would let him receive any visitors when they were busy.

"Thank you very much, mister. We truly thank you. I will call for someone who can handle that for you, so please wait here a moment."

Akuto was not simply saying what he had been taught to say. His words

of thanks were his own. The gentleman seemed incredibly moved to see someone as young as Akuto speaking so smoothly.

"This is a surprise. What a well-mannered child. How about I hand the donation to you? You can then pass it on to whoever is in charge."

The gentleman must have prepared his donation before knocking on the orphanage door because he pulled a white envelope out of his inner coat pocket and handed it to Akuto. The envelope was heavy, so Akuto could tell it had a large sum of money inside. When the gentleman saw Akuto's look of surprise, he smiled kindly and nodded.

"Thank you very much. We cannot give you anything in return, but at least give everyone the opportunity to thank you directly. If you can come in and wait, I will call for everyone," said Akuto as he bowed deeply.

"No, that is not necessary. I have merely done what is completely natural for a follower of the god Ko Ro. Do not thank me; thank my god."

With that humble comment, the gentleman put on his hat and began to leave.

"Please wait. I would rather thank you than your god," said Akuto.

The gentleman stopped and stroked the edge of his hat with a gentle expression.

"You must not. I have done nothing. This is the benevolence of god. It was all thanks to my god leading me to this place."

Those words were not an attempt to hide his embarrassment. The gentleman's tone of voice made it clear they were rooted in his deep piety.

If he had been speaking to a normal child, this would have ended as nothing but a good memory for the orphanage.

However, he was speaking with Akuto.

"The gods are nothing but systems, so thanking them would change your kindness into nothing but selfishness. That is why I cannot thank your god. I wish to simply thank your kindness," said Akuto.

He truly was too clever for his age.

It was true that the gods of this age were nothing more than control systems that recorded people's actions in order to provide social services.

However, since everyone had their everyday actions recorded, they were required to take actions in accordance with what was defined as "correct" in order to be given a better life. This had led to a situation where even very educated people fell into blind faith or religious zeal. It may have been that piety could not be controlled by reason, but Akuto did not fully understand that.

"Do not be so rude! God will punish you for this! The gods exist and have wills of their own, so it is only natural to thank and fear them! And that creates solidarity between believers. Now apologize to god!"

The gentleman approached Akuto while filled with emotion.

Akuto could not see how the gentleman's thinking made any sense whatsoever.

"I cannot apologize to something that does not exist."

"What a horrible child! I fear what will happen to you in the future! How can you even think of opposing the gods!? This is why you are an orphan."

The gentleman looked at Akuto with a look of contempt.

Akuto was shocked. He was not so much shocked at the contempt as he was that a man he had thought was such a good person could say such discriminatory things.

"Have you fallen so far into your belief in a system created by humans that you have no idea what horrible things you are saying?" asked Akuto in a trembling voice.

"Give it a rest! Everyone believes in it, so what does it matter!? And are you really going to oppose someone who is willing to give you money!?"

At this point, the teachers noticed the gentleman's shouting and dragged Akuto away. They bowed down to the gentleman, somehow managed to get the donation out of him, and had the other orphans sing for him. In the end, the gentleman left in a good mood.

One male teacher sighed, turned a bitter smile in Akuto's direction, and spoke with a slight tone of amusement.

"You know, there are times when you need to bow down in apology even when you are right."

The teacher did not expect Akuto to understand. However, Akuto fully understood yet still shook his head.

"I will make sure I never have to do that. I just have to be someone important, right? If I can do what is right at a time like this, nothing could be easier."

The teacher's eyes opened wide.

"Then I hope you become someone truly important. But it will not be that easy."

The teacher's words seemed to drift into the distance and Akuto finally realized this was a dream. He had been recalling something from the past.

Chapter 1: Someone is Targeting Someone

Part 1

Akuto awoke feeling frustrated.

—Honestly, why do I have to remember something like that?

He was good looking but had a mean look to his face. When he scowled, no one wanted to be anywhere near him.

However, he did not need to worry about anyone he did not know well seeing his face. Constant Magic Academy was on a long break, so few people were left in the dorms. Akuto was all alone where he had been napping under a tree behind the dorm. He looked up to see birds flying peacefully through the sky.

—This weather is so nice I feel like nothing bad is going to happen. I must be a really rebellious person to remember something like that at a cheerful time like this.

Akuto smiled in self-mockery before hearing a distant voice.

"A-chaan! There you are."

Soga Keena was running over to him with a huge smile on her face. That was the expression of someone with no worries. A few tufts of red hair on the top of her head swayed back and forth. He could never stay in a bad mood while looking at them. Keena plopped down on the ground next to Akuto.

"I had nothing to do, so I felt like going outside."

"I see."

Keena looked like she wanted to say something, so Akuto tried to get it out of her.

"What is it?"

"Um, well. Do you know when your birthday is, A-chan?"

"Well, I was an orphan. The orphanage often had to choose an arbitrary one, so they went with the day we were abandoned. For me, it was December 25."

As soon as he said that, Akuto recalled that Keena had been an orphan, too. It was a difficult topic for those who were not orphans, but Keena replied cheerfully.

"I see. I didn't know mine, so I decided on one for myself."

Keena suddenly began to fidget around.

"What is it?" Akuto asked once more.

Keena smiled shyly and said, "Um, when my birthday comes, will you

celebrate it with me?"

"Of course."

When Akuto naturally agreed, Keena's shoulders relaxed in relief.

"Thank goodness. After all, it's the birthday I decided for myself. I can get lost in my own thoughts sometimes, right? I thought you might be too shocked this time."

"You've shocked me more than enough already. In fact, you shocked me enough the first time we met," said Akuto with a shrug.

"Eh? Don't be so mean."

"You randomly decided to call yourself my observer."

"But I was so lonely before meeting you, A-chan. And it is true that I watch over you..."

"What day is it?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Your birthday."

"U-um, it's coming up soon, but I'll tell you once it's here."

"But then I might not be with you that day."

"That just means you have to be with me every day, right?"

"I see you're being selfish again."

Akuto sighed and Keena shook her head as if to shake free of something.

"H-hey, A-chan! This is really nice weather! Let's play!"

Akuto could not simply refuse her. He might have done so before, but he had started to feel mysteriously at ease while with Keena.

"Play? But I'm not too good at just having fun. I suppose I can play some kind of game with you, though. What should we do?" he asked.

Keena energetically replied, "Let's take a nap!"



"Eh? A nap? But I just woke up from one..."

But by the time he said that, Keena had already leaned up against him and fallen sleep.

—In a way, she has some amazing talents.

Akuto decided to remain still so as not to wake Keena. He pulled out his student handbook and activated the library function. A mana screen was projected in front of his chest and he began to read a book he was interested in. He had a feeling he might be able to learn something from an ancient religious studies book. He received some suggestions for his own thoughts from the book, but he could not grasp how he could think like that gentleman had.

—If thinking about it will only make me feel self-important, maybe I should just not think about it. Like Keena does.

Akuto looked up from the book and began playing with Keena's hair as it swayed in front of his face.

"No, no. That isn't a good place for a seedling to grow. A better place would be..."

As she slept, Keena muttered something nonsensical in a serious tone of voice.

Akuto had no idea why, but he got the feeling a moment like this would never come again. A premonition seemed to numb the core of his mind. It made him feel like some change was coming and he felt nostalgic for only five seconds ago.

—I don't pray to any god, but it's almost like I have religious faith in Keena.

Suhara could be summed up as a god that valued nationalism. The military forces protecting the country were divided into two large categories: the knights and the imperial army. However, only Suhara followers were allowed in the latter.

Suhara was passionate about protecting the law, family lineage, and honor. Suhara also gave permission to use powerful attack magic for those who took courageous actions. This was why Suhara followers were generally viewed as polite and family oriented yet inflexible and violent.

The top position among Suhara followers was the high priest. The man who currently held the position was named Teruya Keizou. He was the father of Teruya Eiko who had troubled Akuto in the past. The Teruya family primarily carried out intelligence work. During the many years without a war against an external enemy, their power had only continued to grow. In the present day, they had succeeded in gathering the influence needed to take the position of the family in control of both the army and navy. They had long been in conflict with the Hattori family that protected important members of the government. Neither wished to let the other hold the position of high priest. However, it had been decided that the Hattori family had already earned enough honor in their direct service to the emperor, so the Teruya family had won out in the end.

Teruya Keizou was a rare sort of man who proudly and boldly carried out cowardly and evil actions. Those who had been driven to ruin by him all agreed on that point. He had stolen and assassinated without fear, hesitation, or even growing drunk on the pleasure. Even after becoming high priest, he had directly ended people's lives more than just once or twice.

At some point an evil shadow had appeared on his face. Everyone could feel it, but his actual expression had grown gentle and bright as the years had gone by. As Keizou adjusted his posture as he sat in Japanese clothing, he was a bizarre existence who was clearly evil yet could only be seen as a saint.

Keizou currently had a rare look of concern. His eyes that usually appeared to be smiling were now emitting a sharp light upwards.

Keizou was inside the temple of Suhara. It was a large shrine in a quiet forest outside of the imperial capital. A majestic tile-roofed shrine could be seen past the torii. Inside the actual shrine, the bamboo blind was opened. Enshrined within was the god tree which held the god. The god tree was a stump about the size of a human being. It stood straight up in front of Keizou who sat atop woven rattan. The god tree was the device used when a human needed to contact Suhara. No one except Keizou was currently inside the shrine. He was directly speaking with the god.

"Is this really the individual?" asked Keizou in a probing voice.

Two shrine maidens then walked out from behind the god tree. They possessed identical beautiful faces. They moved to the left and right and stood before Keizou.

"That is Suhara's decision."

"Leave the final decision to us."

They were L'Isle-Adams. They existed to provide assistance when the

conversation between god and human was not going well. Their official position was that of bishop which was higher than high priest. However, that was in name only. The high priest was the only one with the authority to change the actual program of the god. In effect, the position of high priest was higher than that of the god.

However, the situation was slightly different in Suhara's case.

"Is this really who we are to assassinate?" asked Keizou once more.

Suhara would occasionally inform the high priest if it was confirmed that an individual had committed treason. The god monitored people's actions via the mana that filled the atmosphere. If proof was obtained that someone was a rebel, the high priest would be sent the evidence and the individual's location.

This system was of course kept a secret from the public and many of the high government officials who did know about it were critical of it. However, those officials were forced to admit it was effective. It allowed any rebellion against the empire to be stopped before it reached any large scale.

"You are not being told to assassinate this individual."

"However, the individual's treason has already been confirmed."

The shrine maidens both spoke.

"But I have been given no evidence."

That was why Keizou was so concerned. He had been given data on the alleged rebel's location. However, he had been given no specific charges or evidence.

"The evidence cannot be revealed."

"Not even to the high priest."

Keizou was keenly aware of how abnormal this announcement was. A high priest of course understood that a god was nothing more than a system.

—Should I use the cancellation code?

Keizou worried over whether he should use his authority as high priest. If he used the cancellation code, he would be able to rewrite the god's program. In the off chance that something had gone wrong with Suhara, he could handle it.

—But the priests would likely criticize me for overturning the god's decision based on my own will. And if an error in the system is found now, it would mean the previous assassinations were mistakes as well.

The god merely provided information on rebels. It was up to the high priest whether they would be killed or captured. And Keizou was fond of assassination. When he had only been a normal priest, he had tricked his political enemies into rebelling and then used that as evidence to kill them. If the past killings were thrown into question, it could easily lead to

his downfall.

—I would usually use a special unit from the military, but I will stick with my personal troops for this one.

“In that case, I will take this data. Leave the rest to me.” said Keizou.

The shrine maidens nodded.

“Understood. Please do. However...”

“Even if you are a high priest, how you handle this data could be deemed a rebellion against the empire.”

“Do not forget that.”

As the shrine maidens took turns speaking, they spun around.

—What?

They had never made a threat like that before. In fact, it should have been impossible for the system of a god to do so. The only possibility he could come up with was that the god had gained something akin to free will.

“Wait. What was that threat?” he asked, but the two shrine maidens had already disappeared behind Suhara. And Suhara said nothing. “Either

way, I just have to kill the target. That's what I was planning to do anyway."

After that announcement to Suhara, Keizou stood.

—Suhara is gaining a will? No, it couldn't be. Either way, once this has been taken care of, I can reveal Suhara's odd behavior to the priests as a separate matter. This is only the life of a single young girl. It will be over quickly.

Data floated before Keizou's eyes on a mana screen. He flicked it to mark it as secret. The data displayed a red-haired girl with a huge smile on her face. Her name was displayed as well.

"Soga Keena. I have never heard that name before, but she appears to be about the same age as my daughter. Poor thing."

Part 2

The Hattori family had an antagonistic relationship with the Teruya family. The eldest daughter of that family, Hattori Junko, was currently seriously worried.

—What am I supposed to do? I can only think this is a problem I can never resolve...

She held her student handbook which could be used as a communications device. It currently displayed a message from her family. The subject was "The preparations for the marriage interview are complete."

—If they have already made the preparations, it means father has already heard. I cannot back out now.

Junko was hiding in the woods behind the dorms. She had a mana screen set up in front of her to camouflage herself among the trees. No one could find her if they simply glanced around.

And Junko was currently watching Keena nap and Akuto read a book next to her.

Akuto was the one she was to have a marriage interview with. Junko had not done anything, but it seemed Korone had already contacted the Hattori family.

Korone was an artificial human called a L'Isle-Adam sent by the government to be Akuto's observer as it was thought he would become a demon king. The political situation behind it seemed to be complex. Some hardliners wished to eliminate Akuto to eliminate the risk of the demon king. To prevent that, it had been suggested that he could marry into the distinguished Hattori family. That was the situation when Junko had received this message.

—Father seemed in a good mood from the message. It is a political marriage, but women of the Hattori family have walked down more tragic paths when it comes to love. He said I could have a happy marriage compared to some other examples... He also cheerfully said that a heavy burden has been taken from my younger sister's shoulders. With the continuation of the family resting on my shoulders, she can do whatever she wants just as before. That is a good thing I suppose. But one problem remains.

That problem was the fact that she had not told Akuto about any of this. The day of the marriage interview was drawing close. Junko needed to tell him before long.

—Wh-wh-what am I supposed to do? Can I just tell him the day of the marriage interview has been decided? But how am I supposed to say it?

—"The day of the marriage interview has been decided." "Eh? Whose?" "M-mine and yours!" "Wait a second. You decided this without asking what I thought? Please do not treat this like I do not have a will of my own. I thought you at least would understand..." He's sure to make that complaint! So how am I supposed to say it? Like this?

—"Please marry me!" "W-wait a second. We aren't old enough for that.

Are you teasing me?" No, that will not work. I cannot start with the marriage. I-I know. I need to see how he feels about it first.

—"Do you like me?" "Of course, Hattori-san. You do everything properly and I can trust you." Yes, that is the kind of guy he is. That will not work either. What am I supposed to say? Wait, isn't it my feelings that are the issue here?

—"I love you. Please be my husband." No, no, no. I can't say that! And is that really how I feel? What do I want between us? I thought I simply wanted to be by his side and to see him? And if his heart belongs to another woman, I am completely fine with-...

—"If you are that worried about this, how about I tell him?"

—No, I have to take responsibility here. I have to do it myself.

"I see."

—Yes. Wait, why is someone else entering my thoughts!?

"You are speaking out loud. This camouflage was meaningless."

"R-really? How much did you hear?"

"From the point when you began those strange one-man plays."

"Eh...?"

Junko looked over to find a feminine face so beautiful it took the breath away from even another girl. It was Korone. She was looking at Junko expressionlessly. Junko's own face froze over in an instant. Her face reddened with a soft bursting sound and she curled up.

"D-do not peer into people's hearts! Such humiliation!"

"Again: you were speaking out loud. But do not worry. I will keep this information secret. It relates to my mission."

"R-really?"

Junko looked relieved.

"Really. I have come to understand that humans wish to hide their sexual desire," stated Korone calmly.

"S-sexual desire? Y-you idiot! Marriage is sacred... And a political marriage is not about that!"

"In that case, you should be able to tell Akuto-san without difficulty. Even if he initially refuses, he should rethink his decision if you explain that it is a political decision."

Korone had a point, so Junko was not sure how to respond. After being told that, she had no choice but to tell Akuto herself, so she felt cornered.

"Y-you are right. Yes. I was just thinking of going over there."

Junko removed the camouflage and began walking.

But the area Akuto and Keena had been in was deserted.

"Wait... They are gone. Th-that means I have to wait until tomorrow to tell him. Yes, I have no choice. That is what I will do."

With that stiff comment, Junko turned around.

And found Korone's face waiting for her.

"It seems Keena-san woke up and announced she was hungry. They went to the dining hall for some food. This Sai Akuto Detector pinpoints his location as the dining hall."

Korone held up a strange-shaped device.

"That certainly is a convenient device," complained Junko.

However, Korone was not lying.

"The dining hall," said Korone as she brought her face in close to Junko's.

Her face was as cruel as an expressionless face could be.

"F-fine! I just have to go, right!?" shouted Junko as she turned toward the dining hall in the dorm.

Not many students remained at the school and it was not meal time, so Akuto and Keena were the only two in the dining hall. Akuto sat at the center of a long table while reading a book on a small screen. Keena was at one end of the dining hall scooping white rice directly out of a rice cooker. This seemed the perfect chance to speak with Akuto alone.

Junko cut across the dining hall while stepping extra loudly to make sure he noticed her. She was too embarrassed to look him in the face, so she walked to the center of the table while still facing to the side. After she felt she was close enough, she spoke.

"Hey, could you go along with me somewhere the day after tomorrow? Oh, it is nothing difficult. It is just a bit of business at my family home. I just wondered if you would go along with me. I mean nothing more by this. It is simply a political matter and my father and family would like to meet you. My home is fairly far away and a feast will be held, so I am afraid you will have to spend the night. My home is large though, so it will not be a problem."

"Wait a second. What kind of business are you talking about?"

"You will see when you get there. It is a political matter, but it should do a lot to help. Do not worry. I will make sure there are no problems for you. The feast will be plenty large to make up for your time. My hometown of Iga has excellent food."

"I see. That's great and all, but I don't think I should be going."

"No, this is about you. If you do not go...eh?"

Junko finally looked forward. Her classmate Hiroshi was standing there. He was short and still gave off a mischievous impression.

Junko looked around. It seemed Hiroshi had arrived next to Akuto without her noticing.

"You're talking about aniki, right?"

Having realized Junko's mistake, Hiroshi was grinning. That grin made Junko want to dig in her heels and refuse to admit her mistake.

"W-well, yes. I was talking about Sai Akuto there. But what I told you was not a mistake! You come, too! That will make everything more lively," roared Junko as she pointed at Hiroshi.

"Please don't say that. I'm actually pretty busy."

"How are you busy? You are a student just like us," argued Junko in displeasure.

Hiroshi scratched at his head with a troubled look.

"Well, yes. That's true. Ha ha. I'm not busy at all."

"You really are acting strange. Anyway, did you hear that?" said Junko as she turned toward Akuto.

It seemed he had. He looked up from his book and nodded with a steady expression. He seemed confused by Junko's odd behavior and must have decided opposing her was not the best option.

"Oh, sure. I heard you. The day after tomorrow, right? That sure is sudden."

"I-I actually knew about this earlier, but never had a chance to tell you... No, that does not matter. At any rate, we will be taking a flying bus. It will pick us up that morning, so come with me. Hiroshi, you too!" said Junko quickly.

"Are you sure this isn't something that has nothing to do with me?"

Hiroshi did not seem convinced, but Junko glared at him harshly.

"I am not simply inviting Akuto here!"

"I-I get it. You don't have to be so stubborn..."

"What was that?"

"No, nothing. I understand."

Hiroshi seemed to have given up, so he sat next to Akuto.

"Good. Remember. It is the day after tomorrow!"

With that parting comment, Junko left the dining hall.

With the bare minimum of her job complete, she breathed a sigh of relief.

As Korone passed by her on the way into the dining hall, she spoke quickly.

"As his observer, I will be going with him. That is not a problem I hope."

Junko grew angry but did not actually say anything.

At the same time, an eerie scene existed underneath the academy. Etou Fujiko trembled as she saw it illuminated by the orange circle of mana light in her hand.

She could see a lake of black liquid that's depth she could not even guess at. Something board-shaped was floating on the shiny, oily surface. The light must have been too bright for it because it dove down into the liquid. In its place, something rod shaped with bristles growing on it poked out of the liquid. A hand covered in claws and scales then pushed

that out of the way. Quite large creatures were squirming about within. And it was a mixture of everything including insects, mammals, and reptiles.

“Demonic beasts! And so many of them!”

Fujiko brought a hand to her mouth as she gave that exclamation of surprise.

Before, demonic beasts had only suddenly appeared and damaged human society. They were creatures other than humans in which an abnormality had occurred due to the mana sent inside them. In most cases, they were exterminated as dangerous beasts. Some research institutions would artificially create them to study the effect of mana on other living creatures, but it was of course banned to own them as pets. Demonic beasts usually had repulsive appearances, so people generally abhorred even the weakest of them. The demonic beasts appearing one after another from the liquid all looked like monsters from a nightmare. There was a giant centipede, an ape with long fangs, and plenty of others. Fujiko had never expected to find something like this below Constant Magic Academy.

“...How wonderful!”

Fujiko’s expression was one of pure joy. She even had heart marks in her eyes. Her long black hair and almond-shaped eyes were befitting of her position as a sworn black magician.

She had come here due to the events of a week before. During Akuto’s encounter on the beach field trip, Fujiko had learned that demonic beasts

were activated by the waves of the mana in his body. And this also gave the activated demonic beasts a limited level of intelligence. Fujiko adored Akuto, so she had decided to keep this fact from him.

—He is just too kind. If he knew about this, he would feel the need to protect the demonic beasts being persecuted. He would force his body too far by splitting off his mana to strengthen them! I must find a way to control the demonic beasts before that happens!

That was Fujiko's decision. In actuality, Akuto would be more likely to blame himself for the demonic beast issue, but that did not matter to Fujiko.

"If I can find a means of controlling them, Akuto-sama will surely thank me by saying this! 'Now, let us rule the world together.' And then he would embrace me... Yes, just like that...wait."

Just as Fujiko was about to embrace herself, she was brought back from her fantasy world. A tentacle was wrapping around her body.

"Hyaaaaaaaah! It's so slimy!"

The tentacle was pink and it covered her body in some kind of sticky liquid. This seemed to be a shelled demonic beast. A giant shell could be seen at the base of the thick tentacle wrapping around Fujiko. Several other thinner tentacles and two antennae with eyeballs on top also extended from the shell. It was something like a snail with tentacles. That meant the thicker tentacle must have been used as a leg.

"Wh-why is it going into my clothes!?"

The tentacle skillfully worked its way up Fujiko's body and the tip slipped into the chest of her uniform.



"Nooo! Don't undo the hook so skillfully! Ee! No! Don't circle around to

the fronnntttt!"

Fujiko reached out to move the tentacle away. She did manage to grab onto the tentacle, but it was so slippery that it easily escaped her grasp.

The owner of the tentacle smiled indecently with the eyes on the end of the antennae. It seemed to have a fair bit of intelligence for a demonic beast, but that intellect had developed in a problematic direction.

"Ee...! F-fwah! No!"

The tentacle lifted Fujiko up into the air and one of the thinner tentacles wrapped around each of her legs.

"W-wait... That's going too far..."

The tentacles spread Fujiko's legs wide and held her in place in midair.

The look in the giant snail's eyes grew even more indecent as it stretched all the rest of its thinner tentacles toward Fujiko's skirt.

Once it did, the look in Fujiko's eyes completely changed.

"I said that's going too damn far!"

With the expression of a fearsome god, she quickly pulled a potion bottle from her pocket and threw it at the giant snail. The giant snail

easily brushed it aside with a tentacle, but the bottle exploded when it landed.

The explosion was small, but it was enough of a blast to surprise the giant snail into withdrawing its tentacles. In that instant of freedom, Fujiko took a position looking down on the giant snail.

“You have some guts to be so perverted while being a hermaphrodite! I’m going to fry you up and eat you with some garlic bread, so just wait here!”

Fujiko held several potion bottles between her fingers.

The giant snail’s tentacles drew in and it looked up at her with fearful eyes.

It seemed less afraid of the exploding potions and more afraid of the look on Fujiko’s face as she held them. With a despondent look in the eyeballs at the end of the antennae, it rubbed its tentacles together as if to apologize.

Fujiko placed a leg on its shell and began rubbing her foot against it.

“As long as you understand.”

But the giant snail somehow appeared to be enjoying being stepped on. Also, the eyeballs on the antennae were looking up Fujiko’s skirt while she lifted up the one leg.

Once Fujiko noticed the look in the giant snail's eyes, she shouted, "You still don't understand!?"

She kicked the giant snail through the air and it seemed to finally surrender. It bowed down and began waving its tentacles up and down toward Fujiko.

Finally, Fujiko's fearsome look grew gentler.

"You still look oddly happy," complained Fujiko.

Apparently the giant snail was the type that enjoyed being kicked by a beautiful woman.

"Are all demonic beasts like this?" asked Fujiko as she turned around and a voice replied from the darkness.

"They are not all like this. This one has special preferences."

Claws suddenly lifted up the giant snail. The snail seemed confused about what was happening, but the look in its eyes changed once it turned around.

A 15 meter dragon was staring back at it with a bored expression.

His body was covered in black scales that shined like metal. His claws and the fangs visible in his mouth were clearly meant for battle and a

great sense of intimidation rose from his entire body.

That black dragon named Peterhausen tossed the giant snail into the pool it had come from.

"If I was not here, you would only be able to control the ones like that giant snail."

Peterhausen indicated the pool that several demonic beasts were attempting to leave. They were all filled with hostility. Fujiko quickly realized that Peterhausen's presence was the only thing keeping them from coming up.

"What is this?" she asked Peterhausen.

"They will not oppose anyone stronger than themselves. They are animals, after all."

"Why are so many of these animals here?"

"This pool is filled with a liquid that cuts off the effects of mana. Some of the poor demonic beasts have a long lifespan, so this was created to let them sleep."

"A long lifespan? So did the previous demon king leave them here?"

"Yes. Occasionally, one of them would awaken, but they have all been filled with energy as my current master has awakened."

"That means I was actually in danger."

"Just be glad that one was the one that attacked you first."

Peterhausen pointed toward the giant snail that was attempting to leave the pool once more.

"Then I will make convenient use of it to thank it," said Fujiko.

At any rate, she could not help but be filled with some joy. The academy's underground labyrinth was famous for demonic beasts occasionally appearing within it, so she had guessed its greatest depths would hold some clues about them. However, this was more than she could have hoped for. It seemed Peterhausen had known the truth from the beginning, but he seemed to avoid interfering too much. If she did not act on her own to determine the truth, he would not explain it to her. Entering the deepest depths of the underground labyrinth without Peterhausen's support was dangerous, but it had been worth it.

"But I get the feeling the others in here could be quite useful," commented Fujiko with a grin.

"And what exactly do you plan to do with them?" asked Peterhausen with a grin of his own as if he already knew the answer.

Fujiko's smile grew even fiercer.

"Akuto-sama cannot yet fully control demonic beasts as the demon king, correct? In that case, I will find a way of controlling them."

"No one besides the demon king has ever been able to control a demonic beast."

"That is because the demon king has never had someone like me at his side. And research never went anywhere because everyone assumed demonic beasts were merely a bug caused by mana. Now that I know they are activated by Akuto-sama's characteristic mana waves, my research should proceed at an accelerated rate. And you will help, won't you?"

"What a pain. Why do you think I would?"

"You are avoiding interference because Akuto-sama needs to awaken of his own free will, correct? Surely you would like to interfere with those around him as long as it will not affect his free will."

Fujiko and Peterhausen exchanged a grin.

"That is mostly accurate. However, that is not the only reason I am avoiding interfering. And I cannot yet tell you what the other reason is."

"By any chance do you like conspiracies? I certainly do."

"Ha ha ha. This is a bit too big to call a conspiracy. It may even be beyond human understanding."

Peterhausen skillfully raised a single eyebrow.

Part 3

Keena was scooping rice from the rice cooker as usual. Junko had left, so Akuto and Hiroshi had nothing better to do than watch her.

"Aniki, how much is Keena-chan going to eat?"

"Who knows. It may not look it, but she's actually taking her time here. She usually eats three rice cookers full, so she has to savor every bite when she only has the one."

"That's amazing," said Hiroshi admiringly. "But more importantly, what was with the class rep? Is it really okay for me to go to her home?"

"How should I know? Even if it didn't seem like she meant to invite you, a promise is a promise. And I would prefer to not go alone. Apparently, it's a political issue... But anyway, are you okay? You've seemed tired lately."

Akuto turned toward Hiroshi.

He did not look well. However, he did not look exactly ill. It seemed he had been performing frequent exhausting jobs without getting much sleep.

"I-I'm fine. It's nothing," denied Hiroshi as he waved his hands in front of himself.

He then brought up a mana screen showing a television broadcast to further dodge the question.

"I hope you're right," said Akuto as he looked over Hiroshi.

He looked exhausted, but a sense of fulfillment could be heard in his voice and seen in the glint in his eye. Akuto felt Hiroshi had somewhat changed recently. He had always been cheerful and sociable, but it seemed as if confidence had been added on top of that.

"Has anything changed recently?" asked Akuto, but Hiroshi smiled bashfully.

"No, no. Nothing really. I've just started to understand how you feel."

"How I feel?"

"Y'know, that desire to help people out."

"No, I don't really know," replied Akuto with a smile.

For some reason, Hiroshi blushed, averted his gaze, and pointed at the television broadcast.

"L-look. It's a live report by the popular idol Hoshino Yuri-chan."

On the screen, a short and beautiful girl was smiling and waving her

hand. It seemed to be a report on an event occurring somewhere. Behind the idol named Hoshino Yuri, advertisement panels and tents were lined up. It seemed to be some kind of corporate exhibition.

"Is she popular?" asked Akuto who was fairly ignorant about such things.

"Yes. You're really behind the times, aniki. She's a singer, an actress, and is even great at witty talks. It hasn't been long since her debut, but she's already standing at the top of all sorts of fields," explained Hiroshi excitedly.

"That's amazing. But I get the feeling I've seen her somewhere before..."

Akuto tilted his head in puzzlement. He did not recognize her face at all, but he could not help but feel he had met her somewhere before.

"C'mon, aniki. You probably just saw her on TV without realizing it."

Hiroshi jabbed Akuto with his elbow.

"I suppose you're right. Honestly, I can be pretty stupid, can't I?"

Akuto smiled at almost the same moment as screams erupted from the screen.

They looked over in shock to find people screaming and fleeing within the event grounds. The cameraman seemed to have panicked because

the footage waved around and alternately showed the sky and ground. This allowed occasional glimpses of nonhuman black shadows cutting across the screen.

"Demonic beasts?" said Hiroshi.

In the next moment, the camera focused in on a large bird demonic beast. It soon became clear there were a large number of them and they were wildly attacking the people and tents.

"This is an emergency! Where is that?" asked Akuto.

Hiroshi stared at the screen as he answered.

"That's the floating island at the bay. I've been there before. It's a location made specifically for events that floats using mana. Unless they can use flight magic, they can't escape!"

"Surely they have boats in case of accidents."

"They do, but they're just for accidents. It will take several minutes to line up and board them, but there will be a lot of victims if they're being attacked like this the whole time!"

"What about the knights?"

"They should be sent out, but only the light knights can fly..."

As if to back up Hiroshi's words, several knights flew into view on the screen. The people cried out, thinking they were saved, but it seemed the knights' magic and guns were ineffective against the demonic beasts. They were easily knocked from the sky by the demonic beasts.

"This is bad. Can't the heavy knights do something?"

"It will take time for them to be sent out. They have to take a flying landing ship," said Hiroshi while looking at Akuto with a troubled look. "A-aniki...I need to go and-...I mean, I just remembered something I have to do."

"Eh?"

Akuto looked back at Hiroshi thinking that was an odd thing to say at a time like this, but Hiroshi looked completely serious. He then said something even odder.

"Th-this will probably become something really cruel, so it would be best not to watch! I-I'll turn off the TV."

Hiroshi deactivated the mana screen and quickly left.

—What was that?

Akuto was confused, but he had an obedient personality at least in a certain sense. As Hiroshi had asked, he kept TV off and instead simply watched Hiroshi run off. Even so, it would leave a bad taste in his mouth if he did nothing and gathered no information on the incident. Akuto stood

up and told Keena he was leaving the dining hall. He wanted to speak with the student council president who he had heard had not returned home for the break.

After Hiroshi ran outside, he made sure no one was around and held the bracelet on his wrist up to his face. He spoke a single word.

"Brave."

A mechanical voice played from the bracelet.

<Command received. The unit will now activate. Creating dimensional fault. All foreign substances within the space 5 cm from the user will be eliminated.>

Hiroshi heard a slight bursting noise and his body was wrapped in light.

<Welcome, Brave. Transferring main unit body. Transfer will take 0.2 seconds. Transfer complete. Electrical components functioning normal. Life support system functioning normal. Outside air circulation mode selected. Activation of nuclear fusion engine awaiting mental input.>

Before the voice finished speaking, Hiroshi's body was completely covered by a suit. Other than the helmet that left his mouth exposed, he appeared to be wearing a skintight riding suit.

The suit did not rely on mana to run. That was a rarity in this era. It was a piece of anti-magic combat equipment that had been passed down by Hiroshi's family due to bizarre circumstances. It acted based on Hiroshi's will and had tremendous combat ability.

"Show me the map. Display my current location," muttered Hiroshi and an image appeared on the helmet's visor.

"I want to arrive in one minute...no, within thirty seconds."

While wearing the suit, Hiroshi floated up into the air from just lightly kicking off the ground. He quickly accelerated upwards high into the sky and then began flying horizontally.

The dot on the map indicating his location quickly approached his destination at the floating island.

Once he had learned the demonic beasts were activating in response to Akuto's internal mana waves, Hiroshi had secretly begun hunting the demonic beasts. He was not doing it for Akuto's sake, but he felt the situation would improve if he continued doing it. He had only begun hunting recently, but rumors of a mysterious hero exterminating demonic beasts had already begun to spread. Some had even reached Hiroshi directly. Helping others and acting as a true hero gave him an incomparable feeling of pleasure.

Fortunately, his identity had not been revealed. The suit he wore was illegal. If he was to continue his hunt, he needed to hide his identity. On top of that, he wished to keep this a secret from Akuto and the others.

The instant after he spotted the floating island, he had already arrived directly above it. He could see a great number of people in the plaza down below. To Hiroshi, it looked like more people were standing still than were fleeing. They were likely waiting for their turn in the emergency exits and escape boats. They could only form small groups and watch the demonic beasts in fear of them approaching.

The light knights were resisting, but they appeared more focused on protecting themselves than anything. Even so, they would draw the demonic beasts' attention, move away when they approached, and then draw their attention once more. Their expressions were perfectly serious as they repeated this process.

"Confirm the locations of the demonic beasts and track them. Let's use the high frequency blade," said Hiroshi.

Claw-like blades extended from the hand guard on the back of his right hand. After lightly swinging his hand once, Hiroshi let gravity take over to begin his descent. He accelerated to a tremendous speed and slammed into one of the demonic beasts.

The large bird demonic beast was trying to crush a light knight's head with its talons, but it froze in place when an object dropped down right next to it.

The light knight's expression changed from fear to confusion. His vision had been blocked by the talons, but it suddenly cleared.

The demonic beast split into three pieces along perfectly straight lines. Before it could even cry out, the demonic beast burst into blood and

feathers and fell to the earth.

The people on the ground quickly noticed what had happened in the sky.

"Look...!"

"It's the rumored Brave! It's the demonic beast hunter Brave!"

Once one person cried out, people all over began cheering.

Hiroshi waved at the people down below and some elderly men and women even waved back while smiling like children.

Hiroshi's body trembled as fresh joy welled up from the bottom of his heart, but this was no time to lose focus. He checked the dots indicating the locations of the demonic beasts on the map displayed on his visor. He circled around behind another nearby one and easily sliced it apart with the high frequency blade. As that demonic beast's corpse fell, he moved toward his next target. His speed and the splendid sharpness of the blades kept even a single drop of blood from reaching his suit.

It seemed the demonic beasts had decided Hiroshi was a priority target. They gathered around him one after another. By the time he took out a third, a ring of demonic beasts had formed around him. They began circling around him at a distance of about 10 meters.

"I'm surrounded. With the people down below, I can't use any of the explosive weapons. Can I avoid it if they all attack at once?" muttered

Hiroshi.

Their wild instincts must have picked up on that fear because the demonic beasts all moved in closer as they continued to circle him. Sharp talons and beaks attacked Hiroshi from every direction.

"Transfer in the monomolecular cutter."

<Understood. Transferring monomolecular cutter.>

A dull light appeared on the suit's left hand. At the same moment, the demonic beasts moved in close enough from every direction that he could not see beyond them.

The faces of the people watching on from below clouded over for an instant. A stir came over them that might have been due to surprise or despair.

However, the people saw an unbelievable sight in the next moment.

As the demonic beasts almost seemed to form a single sphere, the center split open. Pills and giant spherical capsules used at parties were made to split down the middle. This looked almost identical.

"This is the first time I've used the monomolecular cutter..."

Hiroshi's voice trembled in surprise and a bit of fear.

A slight glimmer extended as a string from the fingertip of the suit's left hand. At the end of that string floated a small unit like a detached fingernail. Between the unit and the finger was a wire only as thick as a single molecule. It functioned exactly like a sharp blade.

The gathered demonic beasts had been sliced to pieces in an instant by it.

<The monomolecular cutter has deteriorated due to the absorption of outside matter. If no other instructions are given, it will be disposed of.>

From what the suit's computer said, it seemed the sharper the blade, the more quickly it dulled.

Hiroshi avoided the demonic beast corpses raining down from above and checked how many were remaining. There was only one left. He instructed the suit to dispose of the monomolecular cutter and it disappeared in an instant. It seemed the main body of the suit was located in a different dimension and everything from the equipment to the power was transferred over. Apparently, the reverse was done for disposal.

He could not see the final one right away, but he hurried to the location of the dot on the map. The crowd below cheered for him. They did not seem to realize one still remained.

The final dot was in the very back of a row of advertisement tents. Hiroshi shot by between the tents and discovered why he had not seen it. At the end of the row was a warehouse. The demonic beast had to be inside.

The large warehouse had also been turned into an exhibit. The large delivery door was closed. There was also a door for people to pass through, but Hiroshi decided it was faster to fly through a window than land and use the door.

After making sure no one was down below, he broke through the window and into the warehouse.

He quickly grasped the situation. A single person had escaped into the warehouse but had unfortunately been spotted. The piles of boxes created a labyrinth of passageways. At the end, a demonic beast was repeatedly slamming its body against a door. The door was made of bars, so Hiroshi could tell someone was hiding behind it. The door seemed to lead to the manager's office. The person had managed to escape inside, but the demonic beast could see they were there and it was a dead end.

Hiroshi approached from behind the demonic beast and severed both its wings from its body with the high frequency blade before it could notice him and turn around. It was shaped like a bird, so it used its wings to maintain its balance even while attacking a door meant for humans to pass through. The demonic beast toppled to the floor and let out a strange cry. Hiroshi thrust the blade into it and put it out of its misery.

"Hoo..."

Hiroshi stepped over the demonic beast's corpse and tried to open the door, but he found unexpected resistance. The person beyond the door seemed to be in a state of complete panic. A frantic voice leaked out through the door. It seemed this was a young woman. Hiroshi spoke in an

attempt to calm her down.

“Do not worry. The demonic beast has been eliminated.”

The strength holding the door in place suddenly lessened. Hiroshi turned the doorknob and a girl fell out.

Hiroshi looked at her in surprise. She was Hoshino Yuri, the idol he had seen on TV earlier.

After seeing Hiroshi, Hoshino Yuri began crying in relief.

“W-waaahhhh! It was so scary!”

Her crying was quite loud. Even Hiroshi was surprised. He was forced to adjust the volume in his helmet. But...

—She really is cute...



Hiroshi was entranced by Hoshino Yuri.

After a bit, Yuri stopped crying and she looked Hiroshi over from top to bottom.

"You saved me! Thank you. I really don't like demonic beasts! You're that

Brave who has become famous recently, aren't you? You really are cool!"

Yuri suddenly embraced Hiroshi. And even more surprisingly, she gave a quick kiss to the lips his helmet did not cover.

—Wow...

In his surprise, Hiroshi straightened his back. Once Yuri moved away, he looked at her more closely.

She was shorter than Hiroshi and her face looked more youthful than his, but she had a hint of maturity she hid from others as if she held a great intensity in private. Her expression was mischievous and she gave off an aura that brought unease. It was as if she would try something the instant you let your guard down. And along with all that, she seemed like the kind of girl who would always be the center of attention.

"Keep this a secret."

Yuri brought a finger to her lips and winked.

At the same time, the warehouse's large door opened and a group of knights entered. Hiroshi could see it on his visor without having to turn around, so he spoke to Yuri in an attempt to look good.

"Then keep me a secret too. It seems the knights want to know who I am."

“Really? But you can tell me! I’ll keep it a secret. I want to meet you in secret later!”

Hiroshi actually wanted to give in to the temptation, but he somehow managed to keep quiet. He waved at Yuri, jumped up, and flew toward the knights. The knights began flying after him, but they could not keep up with his speed. He left the warehouse door in an instant. He circled through the sky while listening to the applause and cheers of the people, but then charged high into the sky to lose his pursuers.

Part 4

Keena finished eating her rice after Akuto left the dining hall. She felt tired, so she left the dining hall to go take a nap in Akuto's room.

But then she stopped. A man wearing white stood in the dorm hallway.

He was tall and had perfect style. His hair was perfectly arranged and a bit long for a man. He had clear eyes and a graceful face. He was so beautiful that a look at him would put any girl in a good mood. He appeared to be the same age as Keena or a little older.

When he saw her, he gave a silent bow and walked toward her.

"Hm?"

Keena tilted her head in puzzlement because she did not recognize him.

"Good day."

Keena gave a deep bow in response to that polite greeting.

"Good day. Who are you? Do you need something?" asked Keena.

His expression clouded over slightly, but he quickly formed a smile as if to say that had been nothing. He then pulled a handbook out of his

pocket.

"I work for the Cabinet Office. I have business with this school, but it seems I am a bit lost."

Keena checked the badge in the handbook he opened. It looked splendid, so she assumed it was real.

"Where would you like to go? I can lead you there."

Keena spoke different from normal. This caused the man's face to cloud over once more.

"I would like to meet with whoever is in charge of security."

"Understood. We do not hire anyone specifically for that purpose, so the student council handles it. I will show you to the student council room... What is it?"

Noticing the man's expression, Keena peered at his face.

The man returned her gaze and narrowed his dazzling eyes.

"Oh, nothing. Seeing you simply gives me a somewhat nostalgic feeling."

"What a lovely thing to say. But have we ever met?"

"Now then, my name is Bouichirou. Yamato Bouichirou."

Keena tilted her head in puzzlement once more.

"Sorry. I do not recognize that name."

"I see." Bouichirou let out a sigh. "You do not need to lead me to the student council room. If you simply tell me where it is, I can find it myself."

"Is that so?"

Keena explained where the student council room was. Bouichirou bowed and walked away.

"Thank you very much. Until we meet again."

"Eh? We're going to meet again?"

Keena returned to her usual tone of voice. It was as if a different personality appeared on the surface only while she was facing Bouichirou.

He turned around and smiled.

"We will. As long as you remain who you are, we most certainly will."

When Akuto knocked on the door to the student council room, the student council president, Lily Shiraishi, was inside. She was working at her desk, so she looked up and invited Akuto in.

She was a short girl wearing a stylish hat. She had a determined and mischievous face and did not look much like a student council president, but she acted as if she was used to standing above others.

"What is it?" asked Lily cheerfully as she tipped up the brim of her hat with a finger.

"Oh, it isn't anything too important."

As Akuto explained the details of the demonic beast attack, Lily's expression grew tense. Lily knew that the demonic beasts were essentially born from Akuto. However, she had decided not to inform him of this for the time being. She assumed the government had a reason for leaving the issue alone and she planned to investigate what the situation was behind the scenes.

"In that case, why not check the news from each location? I make a habit of viewing the news from every station," said Lily as she slid a hand across the desk.

Several mana screens appeared and they all displayed a different broadcast. When Lily narrowed it down to only the incident in question, the number of screens decreased to about 20. They were all showing footage of that incident. The footage showed the actions of Brave Hiroshi. The two of them did not know Brave's identity, but Akuto had felt

something during his run-in with Brave during the beach field trip. However, Akuto trusted people a little too much, so he tried as much as possible to not touch on Hiroshi's strange actions.

"Is that guy in the suit popular?"

"Yes. He has been exterminating demonic beasts all over the place. The knights can't teleport in because the mana cost is too high, so they can't respond as quickly as him. He always takes all the credit just before they can do anything about it, so they seem to be feeling resentful. That's why he's popular with the general public, but the knights are desperately trying to capture him since what he is doing is illegal. For some reason, there are no records of his actions and his mana cannot be traced. That suit must have some kind of mana canceller in it. Possessing an illegal object like that is a serious crime."

"I see."

"Oh, but the biggest worry is that his equipment is specialized for anti-magic combat. He seems to be trying to help people for now, but who knows what he could do later. He could easily become what they call a vigilante."

"A vigilante?"

"Yes. Someone whose sense of justice is a little too strong, so they choose to take the law into their own hands. I have a fair bit of that myself. Ha ha ha," laughed Lily.

"In that case, why are you worried about him becoming a vigilante?"

"A vigilante isn't that bad a thing in and of itself. However, a great fight can break out if there are two of them."

Lily turned a remarkably intense smile toward Akuto.

Akuto fell silent just as a knock came on the student council room door. Lily invited the person in and it turned out to be someone neither of them expected.

"Do you have a moment?"

It was a man with long white hair and a long white beard. He was so old it felt the concept of age had lost all meaning. People lived long lives in this era, but he was likely one of the oldest. At the very least, he had certainly lived over 100 years. He had said he had taken part in the war. He was the headmaster of Constant Magic Academy.

"Headmaster."

For once, Lily actually straightened her back. Akuto also corrected his position.

"What do you need?"

Normally, the headmaster did not show up in person because he would settle everything via communications. And there was not much business

of his that required he speak with a student.

"I happened to be nearby, so I decided to stop by. Okay, that was a joke. I actually had a feeling that an old acquaintance of mine would be here. I saw it in a dream. Okay, that part was a joke, too."

The headmaster laughed, but this was no laughing matter for Lily and Akuto. Just seeing that shrewd old man left them at a loss for words.

Suddenly, the eyes mostly hidden by the headmaster's long eyebrows grew sharp. He turned toward the door where a man had appeared at some point.

Akuto and Lily's bodies both stiffened in surprise. This man's presence was not normal.

He was only standing there and his expression was gentle. He was beautiful and he was sociable enough that anyone would let their guard down around him. And yet it almost seemed as if he was emitting a visual pressure.

"Nice to meet you. I suppose," said the man, Yamato Bouichirou.

Akuto stared back at him. Bouichirou was certainly looking directly at Akuto.

Akuto was surprised, but he nodded in greeting all the same.

Bouichirou's gaze was too gentle to be thought of as hostile, but the look in his eyes was by no means warm.

Also, Akuto recognized him. He was not entirely sure, but when he first met Peterhausen, he had seen some images that may have been a mysterious hallucination or may have been a type of mana communication. Those images had shown the man who killed Fujiko's older brother. Akuto did not remember the man's face clearly, but the aura surrounding Bouichirou was identical.

Lily may have noticed this as well because the look on her face had changed. She had been there when they had seen those images.

"I see this is a collection of extraordinary people," said Bouichirou with a smile.



In the next instant, Lily shot her fist toward Bouichirou. However, she did not get up from her desk. She used mana to extend the tissues of her arm itself to send her fist toward the distant door. Her fist approached Bouichirou's jaw with the speed of a bullet.

The dry sound of flesh striking flesh reverberated throughout the student council room.

But it was Akuto's palm that Lily's fist had struck. Lily had not aimed for his palm. Akuto had been standing next to Lily the instant she had thrown the punch, but he had moved next to Bouichirou faster than her fist in order to catch it.

"At least let my hand slip," said Lily in amusement.

She had a smile on her lips.

"President, if someone enters the school unannounced, they must be working for the government, right? I do not know what this is about, but it seems wrong to suddenly punch him," said Akuto in a restrained voice.

"I know what I'm doing. The badge on his collar is enough to tell you he's from the Cabinet Office. My hand just has a bad habit of slipping when I see government officials. And look at him. That trick where you moved faster than my fist wasn't even necessary."

On Lily's instruction, Akuto turned toward Bouichirou.

He had not moved even slightly from where he had been before. His expression had not changed either. He had only moved his right hand. It was inside his inner coat pocket.

"He moved his hand without moving his center of gravity in the slightest. And it's stopped in his pocket because he saw you move and decided he did not need to remove it," said Lily.

If that was true, it meant Bouichirou had seen through both Lily and Akuto's actions. The time between the fist being thrown and Akuto stopping it had been less than 0.2 seconds.

"I would prefer if you did not suddenly do that when you first meet someone. It would be setting a bad example if I did not get angry over it," said Bouichirou with a smile.

His tone was still gentle, but the pressure floating around him suddenly increased.

"Don't get carried away, you petty official."

Lily's voice lowered and she smiled as well.

The tension grew unbearable and it was blatantly obvious the strained atmosphere would burst at any moment. Akuto turned toward Lily and squeezed her fist even tighter.

"President, you have no reason to do this."

"Do I need a reason for a fight?"

"That is not what I mean. He has yet to say anything," said Akuto.

Bouichirou shrugged exaggeratedly and broadened his smile.

"I came here with a warning. I want to know if this academy has the proper level of security."

"The student council takes care of that. You have no right to find any fault in it."

"Is trying to punch people when you first meet them part of your security?"

"You bastard!"

Lily shook off Akuto's hand. The look on Akuto's face changed and he took a defensive stance.

"If you're gonna get in the way, I'll just take both of you out..." warned Lily as she brought a hand to her hat.

Bouichirou smiled fearlessly as he saw that and began to remove his hand from his inner pocket.

In the next instant, a fierce storm would have appeared within the student council room.

However, a silly popping sound rang out instead. And some light and dry objects rained down around the room. They were potato chips.

The headmaster had failed to open a bag of them. He had pulled too hard and the entire bag had ripped apart, sending its contents scattering

everywhere. Potato chip crumbs rained down on Akuto, Lily, and even Bouichirou.

"Sorry about that. The bag was too tough..."

The headmaster scratched at his head and glanced at each of the others' faces.

"The snacks in that basket are the treasurer's personal items, not student council equipment. Please make sure to replace that later," said Lily half in shock.

It seemed the malicious atmosphere had been defused.

Akuto moved away from Bouichirou and gave a sigh of relief. The bag had burst at the exact instant the attacks were about to fly. If it had not been with that exact timing, everyone might have ignored it altogether.

"What a shrewd old man," said Bouichirou as he grabbed a potato chip in his fingers and put it in his mouth.

"Do not say that. Although, I suppose it is rude to waste perfectly good potato chips like that... Oh, wait. You said shrewd, didn't you?" The headmaster smiled and stepped in front of Bouichirou. "You need not worry about the academy's security. We have done well enough so far. More importantly, it has been a long time since I saw you last. What position do you hold now?"

Bouichirou pulled a handbook out of his inner pocket. He opened it up

to reveal a badge. Even Lily's eyes opened wide in shock when she saw it.

"The Director of Cabinet Intelligence and Magic...?"

That post could only be achieved after rising to the top levels of the knights and working as the headmaster of the Knight Training Facility. That position provided one with a tremendous influence over the knights. Normally, no one as young as Bouichirou could hold that position no matter how skilled they were.

"Oh? The head of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office? I am honored that someone like that would come to warn us directly."

The headmaster spoke as if he and Bouichirou were old friends.

On the other hand, Bouichirou still seemed tense.

"I am here to warn you about your level of security. If something does happen here, it is possible I will interfere."

Akuto felt that warning was directed at him.

"Are you implying I will do something?"

"No, something will be done to you," denied Bouichirou with a quick wave of the hand.

"You are the ones that are interfering with me. I have no ambitions. And yet something odd happened on that island. Based on your position, that man must have been your subordinate. It does seem the report concerning the incident was covered up at some point, though."

A harsh look entered Akuto's eyes, but Bouichirou easily deflected it by narrowing his own eyes.

"You all are too innocent. You think I am your enemy, don't you? That is true in a way, but who is your true enemy?"

Bouichirou now questioned Akuto. Akuto responded with thorns in his voice.

"Our enemy? We don't have one. That is such a poor way of thinking. Everyone has some evil in their hearts, so we can't blame any one person like that."

"Humans are evil? Very true. But have neither of you realized who your true enemy is?"

Bouichirou glanced over at both Akuto and the headmaster.

"What?" said Akuto in confusion.

The headmaster did not move in the slightest.

"I came here because I felt I had the leeway to tell you this. You need to

realize where your position in society is. If you ask me, you are within an evil empire. I doubt you will agree with me, though," said Bouichirou as if to no one in particular.

"I am me. I can choose my own position," said Akuto.

With a mocking grin, Bouichirou said, "Your thinking is too childish. Listen. If you get in my way, you will be dragged into the situation and disappear. That will allow me to avoid a lot of difficulty. I want to keep from hurting anyone if at all possible."

"Who are you really?"

Akuto stared directly at Bouichirou. Bouichirou returned the stare. However, Bouichirou soon turned around.

"You can take this as a final warning if you wish," he said before brushing off his shoulders and head and leaving the student council room.

"Headmaster, who was he? It looked like you knew him," said Akuto.

"I have no idea," said the headmaster as if feigning ignorance.

"You don't know?" asked both Akuto and Lily.

"What I mean is that I do not know who he truly is. He has been like that since I was young."

"Like that?" asked the two students, but the headmaster began digging through the snacks in the basket as if the question was of little importance.

"He has always looked exactly like that. He has looked about the same age for around 100 years now."

"100...years?"

"However, his occupation and position have changed frequently. I do not know if it is always the same person or if they are different people. However, they all remember me, so unless they can share memories, it would be simplest to assume it has always been the same person."

The headmaster stopped digging through the snacks. He looked toward Akuto.

"Sai-kun."

"Yes?"

Assuming he was being given a warning, Akuto straightened his back.

"Why does the treasurer here have so many odd-flavored snacks?"

"Perhaps...she has bad taste."

"I see," replied the headmaster with a nod.

Chapter 2: The Shadow of Iga Fully Revealed

Part 1

Akuto was waiting for the flying bus headed to Junko's home, but he was still bothered by what Bouichirou had said. He showed little concern over where he was headed. His mind was so disturbed even he could tell. The headmaster had continued to play dumb, so the student council president had further resolved herself to oppose Bouichirou with her influence. She had even called the three officers back from their homes. However, Akuto felt Bouichirou's visit was more than a mysterious influential official stopping by.

—It felt like he knew a lot about me and had been observing me.

Akuto was certain this was not just him imagining things. It had felt as if the man had known how he would act at all times.

—Is my way of thinking being tested?

Whatever Bouichirou's intentions were, Akuto could not help but think upcoming events would be heavily related to his inner thoughts.

"The bus is here."

"Aniki, you're staring into space. Are you tired?"

Korone and Hiroshi urged Akuto to board the bus. The flying bus that had pulled up in front of the dorm already had its door sitting open waiting for passengers. Akuto, Hiroshi, and Korone were the only ones

waiting to board. Junko was of course riding with them, but she was the one who had prepared the bus. She was already on board, so she called out from within.

"Come on. Hurry up and get on."

With his luggage for a single night in hand, Akuto boarded the flying bus. Hiroshi carried a small travel bag, but Korone only had her usual bag.

Once all three boarded, the bus's doors closed almost impatiently before flying up into the sky. Akuto took a seat and casually looked out the window. He spotted Keena seeing the bus off from outside the dorm. She looked like she wanted to say something and Akuto felt there was a slight tightness in her chest, but she soon smiled and began waving. Feeling relieved, he waved back.

—Come to think of it, I didn't get a chance to speak with her yesterday.

After the incident with Bouichirou, he had eaten with Keena, so he could have spoken with her then. However, he had been so lost in thought that he had never actually done so.

"Come to think of it, we're leaving Keena-chan all alone," said Hiroshi.

"Don't be so sentimental. We won't be gone for long. And she has Peterhausen. He seems busy researching something with senpai, but he gets along with Keena really well for some reason," replied Akuto as he turned to Hiroshi. It looked like the other boy was in an oddly good

mood. "You look happy. And why are you getting so sentimental all of a sudden?"

"Oh, I'm just in that kind of mood."

Hiroshi stared out the window, but it looked more like he was simply staring blankly into the distance. Even so, he looked a bit flushed. Akuto could make no sense out of it.

—Well, at least he's in a good mood.

All conversation suddenly died out on the bus. The silence between the four of them was not all that awkward, but for some reason Junko was continually looking toward Akuto and then looking away with a horribly nervous look on her face.

"What's the matter?" asked Akuto when he noticed.

Junko shook her head almost in a panic, mumbled "nothing", and frantically stuck her hands in her bag.

"I-I was just thinking we could eat something..."

Junko rummaged through her bag. It seemed she could not find what she was looking for because she dug through its contents again and again.

"You are getting too excited," pointed out Korone who had been sitting

silently up to that point.

Junko grew flustered and denied it.

"No, no, no, no, no. I am fine. I am not excited. I am calm. I am perfectly calm."

"You don't look calm to me. Are you okay?" asked Akuto as he held a worried hand out toward her.

Junko drew back while letting out a short cry that was halfway in between "Hyah!" and "Pyah!"

"I wasn't trying to do anything..."

"I-I-I-I know that."

"Then are you not feeling well?"

"That is not it. Th-this is..."

Junko looked like she wanted to say something, but she soon began mumbling. Korone then cut in.

"If you are having trouble saying it, I can-..."

"No, no, no, no. Th-this is a political matter. A high level one."

Junko covered Korone's mouth with her hand.

"A high level political matter?"

Akuto's expression grew serious. He recalled what Bouichirou had said. It seemed the time had come when he would need to change his way of thinking. Obeying the law and doing the right thing were perfectly natural for him, but he was beginning to understand that might be too narrow a way of thinking.

"I want you to tell me this properly. The time may have come for me to take on a large responsibility," said Akuto.

Junko blushed and her hand dropped away from Korone's mouth.

"You...realized it?"

"More or less. I believe I must take responsibility for the sake of the future."

"A-are you serious?"

Junko's mouth fell open in surprise, but when Akuto nodded, she could not help but have that mouth loosen carelessly.

"W-well, if you have finally come around, that is fine. If you understand what this is about, there is no need for me to tell you."

Junko tried to hide her face that would not stop smiling. She brought a hand to her face and pretended to look out the window.

“But I cannot know for sure unless you actually tell me,” pointed out Akuto.

Junko blushed and said, “D-do not make me say it. All that matters is that you understand. And my father will explain everything later.”

—I’m not quite sure what to make of Hattori-san’s expression, but it sounds like an important discussion is coming up.

Akuto kept his mind focused on what Junko had said.

The flying bus slid to a stop in a forest. Hiroshi assumed this was the Iga Village, but a look out the window showed nothing but an area about half the size of a soccer field that had been cleared of all trees.

“Is this the village?” asked Hiroshi.

“No, this is the landing area. The village is about a 20 minute walk from here,” explained Junko.

Junko stepped from the bus and the others followed. A path could be seen leading into the forest from the edge of the clearing. They had not seen it from above because the trees covered it. It did not look like the

trees were naturally covering it, so it had likely been intentionally hidden.

"Is the village itself hidden?" asked Akuto and Junko nodded.

The flying bus they had arrived on moved toward one edge of the clearing. The ground that had appeared to simply be covered by trees suddenly opened to either side, creating an entrance to an underground area.

"That is the parking lot," said Junko.

After swallowing up the bus, the entrance closed once more, leaving only the forest behind. It seemed the village wished to hide everything.

"Amazing," said Akuto in admiration.

Junko looked embarrassed as she began walking ahead of the others.

"Well, just remember what kind of family this is. The house itself is nothing special."

The other three followed Junko down the narrow pathway. But then Junko suddenly stopped. Hiroshi was confused, but the others tensed up.

—Eh? Eh?

Hiroshi glanced around and heard a high-pitched noise.

—Eh?

In his surprise, Hiroshi felt a dull vibration through the bottom of his foot. He looked down to find a cross-shaped shuriken sticking into the ground.

“Waaah!”

Hiroshi belatedly jumped back, but the other three had of course already noticed the attack. Junko had a short sword in hand and Akuto was glaring to the upper right. Even Korone had her hand in her bag from where she stood next to Akuto.

“Eh? What is going on?” asked Hiroshi.

Instead of answering him, Junko shouted, “Yuuko! This is going too far for a prank!”

A voice replied from the forest.

“Ah ha ha ha! Onee-chan, you’re just as skilled as ever.”

Hiroshi tried to look toward the voice, but he could only tell it was coming from the forest. He could not pinpoint the exact location.

“You idiot. What if you hit someone?”

"Don't worry. I aimed for the chain mail you always wear."

"That is not what I meant. What if it was deflected into someone?"

"That's just an issue of your skill."

Junko spoke with the voice as if it was a normal conversation. It seemed Junko's younger sister had come to meet them and had suddenly thrown a shuriken at Junko.

"Come on out now."

"Fiiine."

After that reluctant response, a tree to the upper right rustled a bit. A girl nimbly jumped up from it and rotated through the air. She landed lightly in front of the four on the path.

The short girl gave a joking bow.

"Nice to meet you. I'm her little sister, Yuuko!"

"Ah!" cried Hiroshi without thinking.

This was unmistakably Hoshino Yuri, the idol he had seen up close the day before.

Noticing his reaction, Yuuko waved toward him.

"That's right. I'm an idol."

Hiroshi gave a sigh of relief at her light tone. She did not seem to realize he was Brave.

"Honestly, what a ridiculous little sister. This is what happens when you become a performer. And that is also why you were attacked by demonic beasts," scolded Junko so the other three could hear.

"That had nothing to do with being a performer. But it was thanks to that that I was rescued by that famous Brave!"

"No matter how much you hate demonic beasts, it is shameful for a member of the Hattori family to be rescued by someone else. What do you think all your training is for?"

"What does it matter? I'm not the head of the family or anything. Dad said I didn't have to take my non-idol training all that seriously. And Brave was really cool, so what else matters?"

Yuuko stuck her tongue out at Junko. A grin naturally formed on Hiroshi's face as he listened to that exchange. Being called cool was not a bad feeling. It did not matter if she was talking about when he had a mask on.

"Hey, is this guy your boyfriend?"

Yuuko suddenly moved in front of Hiroshi.

"Eh? Wait..."

Hiroshi panicked, but Junko sharply denied it at the same moment.

"No!"

"Ehh? You don't have to deny it that strongly. Then it must be this one."

Yuuko turned toward Akuto.

"Y-you are...still wrong."

This time, Junko mumbled as she denied it.

"Ehh? But from how you're acting, it must be him. You're too easy to understand. But you should stay away from him."

Yuuko gave Akuto a look of disgust.

"Hey! Do not be so rude!" shouted Junko angrily, but Yuuko was not listening.

"But he's scary. Both his face and presence. He's the only person other than those in the village who was able to pinpoint my location."

Yuuko pointed at Akuto. He had a troubled look on his face.

—Come to think of it, aniki never looked away from the upper right.

Hiroshi was shocked when he recalled Akuto's actions. Akuto would likely have been just as confused as Hiroshi not long ago, but it was growing more and more obvious that he was gradually becoming a true monster.

"Onee-chan, look at him. Why would you marr-..."

Yuuko pouted her lips and started speaking, but Junko suddenly attacked her. She circled around her with ninja speed and held two fingers against Yuuko's throat to keep her from speaking any further.

"Why would I merrily enjoy being around him? That is what you were trying to ask, right?"

Junko's words were filled with killer intent. Yuuko nodded like some kind of machine.

"Th-that's right. Exactly. But onee-chan, this is a killing technique..."

"It is your fault for not avoiding it. Now, let us get to the house," urged Junko.

They began walking, but Yuuko kept some distance between herself and Junko and Akuto. This led to Hiroshi walking alongside her.

"Hey, what kind of person is he?" boldly asked Yuuko while blatantly gesturing toward Akuto with her chin.

"Asking like that is rude," said Hiroshi cautiously.

With a standoffish attitude, Yuuko waved her hand as if to say she did not care.

"But he's scary. He isn't normal."

"Well... He is an amazing person."

"Amazing?"

"He's powerful. He's probably the strongest."

"Ah ha ha. Why do boys always start calling things the strongest?"

"No, it's true."

"It is not true. Have you never seen Brave? Now he's strong. The way he waves his arm real quick like this is so wonderful. And he was so cool when he saved me. He chopped the demonic beast to pieces without

holding back!" said Yuuko absentmindedly.

"Wait, weren't you supposed to keep it a secret that you saw Brave up close?"

"Ehh? But everyone already knows Brave saved me."

"No, I mean how he fights and things like that."

"Eh? What does it matter? I don't even know who he is. The knights asked me a whole bunch of questions, but I can't tell them something I don't know. Wait. Why do you know about Brave and me?"

Yuuko began peering closely at Hiroshi.

—Whoops...

Hiroshi panicked, but he quickly thought up an excuse.

"They were talking about it on TV. 'Does Hoshino Yuri know Brave's secret?' Stuff like that."

"Eh? Really? But Brave and I..."

Yuuko suppressed a laugh.

"Eh? What? Do you know something after all?" asked Hiroshi.

Yuuko spread her arms and ran around the area.

"That's a secret," she said with a finger on her lips.

—Sh-she's so cute...

Hiroshi was deeply moved. It had likely shown on his face, but Yuuko did not seem to mind. She may have been used to guys looking at her that way. But then she stuck her head right in front of Hiroshi's face as if she had remembered something. She then stood on her tiptoes.

"Eh?"

Hiroshi's heart skipped a beat, but Yuuko smiled innocently and spoke.

"You're about the same height as Brave!"

"Oh...A-am I?"

Hiroshi grew flustered, but it did not seem Yuuko had meant anything by her comment. She moved her face away and began cheerfully walking once more.

"Come on. Enough nonsense," chided Junko as she pointed down the path. "We are almost to the house. You let everyone in. I will call for father."

The house was cleverly hidden within the forest. That prevented them from grasping its full structure, but the portion they could see looked like a rather large Japanese-style house. It had no actual gate, but the entrance was surrounded by a wonderful front garden. The entrance was large enough for an entire class to take a commemorative photograph in front of. The roof was covered in black tiles and the house was covered in wood, but the angle the sun would hit with had been calculated out enough for it to glitter beautifully in the sunlight.

Junko headed around to the back of the house. Yuuko casually opened the front door and announced they had visitors. A middle-aged woman in Japanese clothing immediately appeared and bowed.

"Welcome. I am sure you are exhausted. Please come in."

The servant led the three visitors to the parlor.

Hiroshi attended a prestigious academy, so he was not surprised to see a servant working in a house. However, he could not help but be surprised at how the woman carried herself. Akuto seemed to have noticed it as well, so he exchanged a glance with the other boy.

"Everyone in Hattori-san's house seems amazingly agile."

"I know..."

They whispered to each other. Yuuko could not have heard them, but she called out to the servant.

"Hey, is it true the Teruya family is up to something again?"

"Milady, not in front of company," scolded the servant, but Yuuko was not backing down.

"What does it matter? They're practically family. Also, onee-chan told me this one has met Teruya Eiko once before."

Yuuko pointed at Akuto. Akuto looked unsure what to say, but it was true he and Hiroshi had both met Teruya Eiko. Hiroshi had heard the Hattori and Teruya families did not get along then, but he had assumed it was a friendly sort of rivalry.

"Are your two families really on such bad terms?" asked Hiroshi.

Yuuko nodded and said, "It's always been that way, but it's been especially bad recently. They've been wandering around this area."

"Are they planning something?"

"Who knows. It could be anything. Hey, come this way."

Yuuko grabbed Hiroshi's arm and pulled.

"Eh? Why?"

Hiroshi was confused. He had only just been led to the parlor.

"Leave your luggage here. Oh, you wait here."

That last comment was directed at Akuto and accompanied with a shake of the head.

Akuto looked troubled, but he had no choice but to continue into the parlor. Korone followed him.

Only Hiroshi was pulled down the hallway by Yuuko.

"Wait, where are we going?"

"It doesn't really matter, but how about the courtyard? I don't want to be near him."

"Don't say things like that."

"But..."

Yuuko started to say something, but she changed the subject after opening the sliding glass door to the courtyard, slipping on some sandals, and stepping out onto the grass.

"That guy is marrying my sister, right?"

"Eh?"

That was the first Hiroshi had heard of that.

"I haven't heard anything about that."

While in shock, Hiroshi followed her into the courtyard.

"Really? I suppose my sister can be shy about that kind of thing."

Yuuko sat on a roofed bench in the courtyard. Hiroshi stood in front of her.

"What do you mean marrying?"

"I mean exactly that. I don't really understand it, but it seems that guy is called the demon king and this marriage will make him more behaved."

"Can they really decide that so easily...?"

"Hm. It may be hard to understand from a different religion, but our family follows Suhara. Orders from above are absolute. Political marriages are completely possible. The Teruya family's actions may be because they're afraid of us gaining more influence."

"I see."

Hearing it explained that way made Hiroshi feel it may not be that bad a thing. At the very least, it would resolve a good number of Akuto's worries.

"I supported this at first, but I don't like it if it's with him."

"Why do you keep saying things like that? He's a really good person," protested Hiroshi.

However, the response he got was unexpected.

"He has the scent of a demonic beast."

—Eh?

Hiroshi knew better than anyone that she was not lying. And that was why he was so shocked.

"Y-you can tell?"

"Yes. By scent. I think I'm sensitive to that kind of scent. There's something about the area around a demonic beast that I really hate. I haven't told this to many people, but I was almost killed by a demonic beast once."

Yuuko's voice was calm, but she must have had some mental resistance. Hiroshi noticed her hands were trembling slightly.

"It happened when I was a kid, but I remember it clearly. The beast was made from some type of bug and it bit me. That was enough to give me a standard phobia, but it was more than that. It seems some of the demonic beast's mana entered my body. I didn't actually affect my body, so I'm fine for the most part. But when a demonic beast is nearby...it's less like I'm afraid of the demonic beast and more like I'm filled with such fear it feels like I'm going to lose my mind."

Yuuko smiled as she spoke, but her words were a great shock to Hiroshi.

—Come to think of it, I've heard that demonic beast mana is normal mana that some sort of error has occurred in. Who knows what would happen if you got that in your body.

Yuuko noticed the serious look on Hiroshi's face, so she began laughing and waving her hand.

"Ah ha ha ha. Don't worry. I have a unit inside me from when I was baptized into Suhara, right? That is constantly casting magic on the mana. The demonic beast mana is held in check as it tries to increase. I'll be fine unless Suhara disappears. But how could that ever happen?"

"I see," said Hiroshi in relief.

Yuuko then gave him a teasing smile.

"Why are you so worried about me? Do you have some kind of ulterior motive?"

"No, of course not!"

Hiroshi frantically shook his head, but Yuuko's mischievous expression did not change.

"Is that so? My fans always seem to view me with an image they decided on by themselves. And those that deny it mostly want to see the true me, but in an indecent way. And yet the real me is just a boring person no different from anyone else."

"N-no, that isn't true. You're amazing, Yuuko-san," said Hiroshi.

Yuuko narrowed her eyes as if he was mocking her.

"A lot of people say that, but that's what I call having an ulterior motive."

"No, that's not it! Despite being born into such a great family, you challenged yourself by trying out all those different things. That's what I mean when I say you're amazing."

Yuuko finally opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"I've been called selfish for being from such a rich family, but no one's ever told me that before. For acting, singing, writing songs, and doing variety shows, I've always been called selfish and indecisive." Yuuko grinned. "But saying I've done all that despite my family is not quite accurate. It's the opposite. It's not that I don't want to rely on my family or even that I do. I feel that I have to do something for my family. I don't know if what I'm doing is helping all that much, but that's what I'm trying

to do.”

“You want to do something for your family?”

“If I had not been born in this family, I would have died. This special protection from Suhara is not something just anyone can get. I am thankful for my family. And I don’t mean my parents by that. I mean my good fortune to be a part of this family. This is kind of embarrassing. I’ve never said any of this before.”

Yuuko scratched her head and blushed a little.

“No, I think it’s amazing.”

For some reason, Hiroshi felt embarrassed too, so he scratched at his head as well.

Whether to hide her embarrassment or not, Yuuko’s expression suddenly grew very serious.

“Hey. Do you believe in god?”

“Eh?”

“And when I say god, I mean a real god.”

“That’s kind of a hard question to answer,” said Hiroshi in confusion.

"I know. But believing in Suhara is actually believing in the bonds of everyone supporting Suhara. In other words, it is no different from believing in the bonds of family and the like. However, things like family and the meetings between people are not here due to Suhara's doing. I think where you are born and the people you meet by coincidence are decided by the real god. That is why I believe in a real god and that is why I work as a performer. I work to create bonds between all sorts of people through my broadcasts. What I find most important is my family, so I intend to truly serve Suhara and obey my family."

"I have no thoughts as wonderful as that. I am impressed."

Hiroshi sighed and Yuuko smiled in embarrassment.

"Saying that isn't going to get you anything."

"I wasn't expecting anything."

Hiroshi smiled, too.

After Yuuko had smiled for a while, she suddenly looked up at Hiroshi with a serious expression.

"But it would've been fun if you had a bit of an ulterior motive of wanting to get to know me better."

—Eh?

For an instant, Hiroshi thought on what she meant.

—Does that mean...?

Certain hopes swelled up within him and his expression grew serious, but Yuuko's face quickly grew mischievous.

"After all, anyone who tries to get to know me better has to be tested by everyone living here."

"What? Everyone living here?"

As soon as Hiroshi spoke that question, he realized he was surrounded by hostile gazes.

He looked around and found people dressed in the ninja outfit of black clothes with a black hood that left only the eyes exposed. They were just about to begin attacking Hiroshi. He wanted to ask where they had come from, but he found his answer shortly thereafter. There had been hidden doors across the courtyard lawn, by the side of the bench, and elsewhere. A few ninja had their heads and feet sticking out of those doors.

"Waaah!"

Hiroshi panicked, but Yuuko smiled.

"People trying to be my friends, my fans, or anyone else who tries to

approach me are all taken out by them."

"Wh-wh-what is going on?"

Hiroshi's legs were about to collapse underneath him.

"Getting to know me better is the same as becoming a part of the family, so they have to test anyone who wants to be my friend."

"T-t-test?"

"You attack them with your special technique as they attack you with theirs. If they recognize your power, you'll be best friends."

"W-wait! I don't have a special technique! And these people are clearly not trying to make friends! They're just hunting down any guy who approaches you!" exclaimed Hiroshi.

The ninja all shook their heads. As they slowly approached Hiroshi, they spoke.

"You want to be our friend, right?"

"We want to be your friend. Let's test out our techniques on each other."

"You have some guts approaching the young lady like this."

"See!? That last comment was clearly a threat! They're just threatening me!"

When Hiroshi pointed it out, Yuuko gave a bitter smile and rested her head on her hand while sitting on the bench.

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes!"

"I see... All the guys I bring home end up running away. I guess I need someone as strong as Brave."

Yuuko sighed regretfully.

"I-I-I get it! I won't do anything!"

As the ninja group slowly approached Hiroshi while filled with killer intent and wielding swords and brass knuckles, he quickly moved back away from Yuuko.

"Sigh... But my dad is the worst when it comes to this. That guy is probably in trouble right about now," muttered Yuuko.

"Aniki is?"

"Yes. He's supposed to marry my sister. That really is becoming part of

the family.”

“Then is your father attacking him with a weapon right now?”

“Don’t be so rude. He isn’t attacking him; he’s testing his skill and his courage.”

“Isn’t that just a different way of saying the same thing?” complained Hiroshi.

However, he fell silent when he heard swords being drawn around him.

Part 2

Akuto and Korone were left in the parlor, but as guests, they had no choice but to sit quietly. The woman in Japanese clothes who had led them there left them with some tea, but it had started to grow cold after they had only drunk half of it.

"Am I being tested?" Akuto asked Korone.

"Are you? It is hard to tell."

—Either way, I need to be careful what I say. I need to keep my guard up.

While resolving himself, the sliding door opened.

"Welcome. I hear you have been a help to Junko on several occasions."

Standing beyond the door was a short man who gave off an aura of vitality.

Akuto had not noticed him approach until the door had slid open. Normally, he would have at least heard the footsteps and Akuto was also the person who had seen through Yuuko's hidden position. It was clear this man was no ordinary person.

He wore Japanese clothing and appeared to be between the ages of 40 and 50. His white teeth stood out on his darkly tanned face. His properly

combed down hair was a deep black and very healthy looking. However, he lacked the “lightness” common in men like that. It felt as if he was always wrapped in a dignified yet not uncomfortable atmosphere.

“I am Youzou, her father,” he greeted Akuto who had stood up. He then urged Akuto to sit back down. “I have heard many rumors about you.”

As Youzou sat before Akuto, he gave a carefree smile.

“That is embarrassing to hear. Junko-san has also been a help to me both as the class representative and as someone knowledgeable about the school,” replied Akuto with a bow.

“To get right to the point, do you love Junko?”

Youzou’s statement was akin to a surprise attack.

A normal teenage boy would have had trouble answering that question, but Akuto viewed the word “love” as including every meaning of the word including those outside of romantic love. And on top of that, Akuto was the type of person who would not hesitate to speak his feelings honestly.

“Absolutely,” he replied immediately.

Youzou gave a hearty laugh.

“Ha ha ha ha ! What a pleasant young man. But you know Junko’s

position, do you not? Do you know what it means to the Hattori family for you to live with her?"

Akuto was well aware what troubles Junko had gone through in living in the same student dormitory as him and consider him her ally. Also, he had been told this was a political matter.

"I understand that it holds political meaning. It is not merely an issue of feelings. No matter how difficult it may be, I wish to make the decision that is best for Junko-san's surroundings and family environment."

Akuto meant every word of it.

However, to someone who heard those words with the assumption of him planning to marry Junko, they could only mean one thing. Youzou smiled. He looked delighted down to the bottom of his heart, but the smile also appeared intimidating to any who saw it.

"As her father, I am pleased to hear those words. But do you mind if I test you to see if you are truly prepared?"

His tone was quiet, but his voice contained enough intensity to cause even some of the most powerful people in history to shrink back.

Even so, Akuto answered calmly.

"I am prepared to be tested."

“How wonderful are you? I have taken a liking to you as a fellow man.”

As soon as Youzou said that, a dreadful scene appeared before Akuto’s eyes.

While still sitting seiza-style, Youzou jumped up. The power of his leap was frightening. With only the strength of pushing his knees down, he jumped a meter into the air.

—!

Akuto was utterly shocked and he reflexively stood up.

When he did, Youzou drew his sword while still in the seiza-style position in midair. He made a perfectly horizontal strike. Akuto caught the sword with his hand, but this placed nothing but his bare hand in front of the blade. His fingers were severed and flew through the air and the sword travelled directly for his neck.

—I’m dead!

Akuto felt his own death.

—Is this the end...? Wait, why can I still think?

As soon as he realized that, Akuto felt his eyes suddenly open.

He was standing in the middle of the parlor and Youzou was still seated where he had been before. He looked over and saw Korone sitting with the same expression as before. (Not that it would have changed had something happened.)

“Why did you suddenly stand up?” asked Korone.

—That must mean that didn’t actually happen.

Akuto brought a hand to his neck. Nothing was out of the ordinary there.

“An excellent reaction. As to be expected of the one said to become the demon king.”

Youzou slapped his own leg.

Akuto realized Youzou did not even have a sword on him. That made sense. No man would appear before clearly unarmed guests in his house wearing a sword.

“That was...an illusion?” muttered Akuto.

He did not understand how it worked, but he had clearly been shown some kind of illusion. The one thing he did know was that the illusion had felt very real.

—If Youzou-san really did have a sword, he would have been able to do

the exact same thing.

Akuto was sure of that.

"That is just a little technique of mine. How did you like it?" asked Youzou.

Akuto detected the implied meaning behind the question.

"That may have been an illusion, but you could produce the same result in reality if you wished, couldn't you?" asked Akuto.

Youzou grinned and said, "Yes. It is a technique passed down by our family. More sensitive people can die from the mental shock of the illusion alone, but I thought you would be fine. It may seem a bit cruel, but that is just who I am. I cannot help but test people. At my age, you begin to wonder what would happen if you actually tried to attack certain people."

—So this allows him to detect what would happen without having to actually attack. If the difference in ability is too great, a conflict can be avoided because the result will be obvious. And if the two powers are almost the same, it may not avoid a battle, but he can gain an advantage by subtly adjusting his method of attack during the real thing.

Akuto analyzed the idea behind it. He then continued his thoughts.

—He said it is just who he is, but I doubt he would do something this cruel for no reason. If this is a political issue, it is the same as coming

under his supervision. By showing me his superiority, he can prevent me from opposing him.

Akuto sat back down and bowed.

"Well done. I hope we can remain on good terms for many years to come."

"No, raise your head. I simply grew a bit too enthusiastic after hearing you were to become the demon king. Now that I know what a wonderful young man you are, I am the one that hopes we can remain on good terms. It is a pleasure to meet you." Youzou spoke with a pleasant smile, but his eyes suddenly narrowed before he continued. "By the way, what do you think would happen if I truly attacked you? Tell me what you honestly think."

Akuto was taken off guard by that sudden question, but he soon gave an embarrassed smile.

"I doubt you were completely serious in that attack just now, so I cannot say for sure. However, I picked up on at least some of your mannerisms from that. After seeing it once more, I think the result might change."

Akuto spoke so unconcernedly that Youzou's eyes opened wide for an instant. However, he appeared more surprised than angry. Akuto had not realized it, but he had calmly stated that he would willingly let Youzou once more use a technique that might kill him.

Youzou's expression quickly changed to one of delight.

“That settles it. You are a member of the family now. I will have a feast with plenty of sake prepared right away. No, wait. I suppose at your age, you will need tea instead. At any rate, you can eat the very best food this area has to offer. Feel free to relax and enjoy yourself.”

—It looks like he’s taken a liking to me. Does this mean the Hattori family will act as my guardian from now on? Now I really need to keep up with my studies and become a wonderful politician.

With that carefree thought, Akuto bowed as Youzou left the parlor.

The feast turned out to be a grand event. The dining tables lined up within the tatami-covered hall were piled high with delicacies of both the mountains and seas. At first glance, it appeared to be the simple rural food of a mountain bandit, but a closer inspection showed the food had to have taken a great amount of effort to prepare. The entire family was present as were all of the ninja living in the house, so a great number of people had gathered in the hall. Someone with as poor an upbringing as Akuto could only liken it to a large company’s hot spring trip.

Akuto sat beside Youzou. That was a seat of honor. He had never sat there before, so he did not know how to act.

On Youzou’s other side was Junko. She seemed nervous. In fact, she was so nervous that everything she said came out wrong. She trembled so much as she sat that it was amazing her joints were not clattering. Whenever Youzou spoke to her, she did not seem to have been paying attention. Yuuko sat next to Junko. Those were the only four sitting in

seats of honor. Hiroshi was sitting at the very back of the room.

From the look of the feast, Akuto decided it too was a test for him. Youzou gave a short speech that was very frank and open, but he then turned to Akuto to make a speech of his own. Akuto was now certain he was being tested.

“Sai Akuto-kun here who is being invited in as a member of the family, so let us hear him introduce himself.”

Akuto stood up, but he received no applause from the seated ninja who had removed their masks for the feast. Looks of clear hostility could be seen in their eyes.

—I see. So I have to win them over, too.

“From now on, I will be receiving some help from the Hattori family. This may put a burden on all of you. However, I am well aware of how unique I am and what political influence my actions have from that.”

As Akuto spoke, all eyes in the room focused on him. Some had been whispering to each other before, but they fell silent as he continued to speak.

“I call this a political influence, but it is a negative power. My actions will undoubtedly anger someone. However, power itself has no intrinsic good or evil to it. The same can be said for influence. So why has this become a negative power? That is because people are being led astray by the public opinions they themselves have created.”

An atmosphere of confusion spread as Akuto's speech grew more abstract.

"I say public opinion is the true identity of political power. And so I wish to become one of those who creates public opinion of his own volition. I hope to work to help the Hattori family and to give more honor to its name. I view that as a means of repaying Junko-san."

A stir spread throughout the listeners. Those words meant the boy known as the demon king had obediently surrendered to the Hattori family. However, his aggressive declaration about creating public opinion had been an announcement that he would take part in the political conflict. Anywhere else, that might have been interpreted as the demon king revealing his desire for world domination, but this was the Hattori family. In this warrior faction of Suhara followers, those words were viewed as "promising".

"Now this is a surprise."

"I was afraid when I first heard the master was inviting this boy."

"He seems quite promising. To think Junko-sama has dominated someone on his level."

Akuto was not sure what to make of that reaction, but he continued his speech regardless.

"I hope to learn the ways of the world here. I will make use of the power

the Hattori family provides. However, I will not use the Hattori family for my own self-interest. I am sure some of you will find it difficult to trust me. After all, I belong to a different religion. Nevertheless, I promise to never betray Junko-san."

Akuto looked over toward Junko.

She was shocked at his look and her spine twitched a bit. A short while later, she finally seemed to grasp what Akuto had said. Her stiff expression grew distorted and she brought a hand to her cheek to hide it. Even so, she could not stop the tears flowing out.

—W-was she that moved by my speech?

Akuto had only been trying to make himself look good, so he was surprised she would react that strongly to it. However, the ninja forces gathered for the feast were deeply moved by those tears.

"Oooohhhhh!"

"I wish you happiness!"

"I'll allow it! I never thought I would say this, but I'll allow it!"

The stir among the many ninja seated on the tatami mats grew into full-blown shouting. Akuto did not quite understand the effects of his words or the situation as a whole, but he was not given a chance to say anything more as excitement grew at the feast.

Urged on by the sake and appetizers, people began speaking loudly to each other and the feast began with an informal atmosphere.

Ninja after ninja walked up to Akuto while crying, pouring him a drink, and telling him to "make the young lady happy". As these vague greetings continued on and on, he stopped paying much attention.

Junko's tears had stopped and she was eating with a happy expression. She cheerfully greeted every ninja who came to greet her. However, she refused to look Akuto in the eye and never looked in his direction.

For some reason, Hiroshi seemed to have hit it off well with the ninja. They were having a lively discussion on idols.

"Again: we're asking what Lady Yuuko needs to do to get even better sales."

"That Chisato girl who is doing well lately is getting in her way.

"No, Chisato-chan is the old type of idol," explained Hiroshi. "She's the type who will go down in flames with a single scandal about having a boyfriend. The type of idol that loses fans from a boyfriend is the old type that uses her virginity to give her fans illusions of being her lover. Yuuko-chan is different. She has a wild personality and has so many talents, so it would be hard to imagine being her lover."

The ninja nodded at Hiroshi's discourse on idols.

“Ohh, that’s an academy student for you.”

“He’s such an intellectual.”

Yuuko had been looking displeased before, but she suddenly proclaimed she would sing and had a karaoke set prepared.

When Yuuko began singing one of her songs, the feast reached its high point.

Akuto was happier than he had ever been before in his life. However, he was oblivious as to why the Hattori family was providing him with such happiness.

Night came. Junko was alone in her room when she was suddenly overcome with anxiety. After the feast, she had quickly felt empty. People often regretted saying something on a whim. This feeling was similar. She began to grow suspicious of how Akuto was acting.



—Am I just imagining this? No, he is definitely acting oddly calm. He often has a bit of a displeased look, but today of all days, it seems he should act a bit embarrassed when teased.

With that weighing on her mind, Junko found it difficult to stay put in her room.

—Is it possible he really is mistaken about this? No, worrying about it will not change anything. I know. I need to check with him. That is what I need to do.

With that thought, Junko stood up.

However...

—But how am I supposed to check? Do I simply ask him if he is prepared to marry me? If he really is, then it will mean I was doubting him. That is worthy of seppuku.

Junko tilted her head in puzzlement. But then an idea came to her. However, she felt oddly flushed as soon as she thought of it.

—He has yet to convert from his religion. That means his doctrines forbid him from d-doing that kind of thing before marriage. If I urge him to do what is only natural for husband and wife, I can tell if he understands the situation or not.

Junko began to leave her room, but her hand stopped on the sliding door.

—But if he goes along with this, we will actually go through it. B-but maybe...that's okay? W-wait, in that case, I need to bathe first...

Junko pulled a change of clothes from her dresser and headed for the bath.

—I seriously doubt it, but am I hoping something will happen...?

As she washed her body in the bath, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her face had an untidy grin on it.

“W-wah... If I do not stay focused, he will start to dislike me,” she said out loud.

—N-no, I am not focusing to prevent him from disliking me. B-but...If he really does not know and we end up d-doing it anyway, wouldn't he be forced to marry me then?

That thought caused Junko to blush so much even she thought it was pathetic.

“Th-that is from staying in the bath too long. I need to finish bathing and get out.”

Junko began frantically scrubbing her body.

Meanwhile, Akuto lay in the room prepared for him. After taking a bath, he had changed into the T-shirt and shorts he had brought to sleep in, and climbed into the futon.

Akuto was enjoying the silence of the night after the craziness of the feast.

—This is such a happy feeling...but I just can't seem to relax. I get the feeling I'm not cut out for this kind of thing. Maybe I just need more experience with it...

As he thought on that, Akuto suddenly sensed a presence outside the room. He sat up in the futon.

"Who is it?" he asked.

The door slid open and Junko was kneeling on the ground.

—Eh?

Junko was acting differently from normal. Thanks to the moonlight, her bodyline was visible through the thin white kimono she wore to sleep in. However, it was her expression that had surprised Akuto. She was still just as nervous as before, but her slightly flushed cheeks gave off a mature atmosphere.

"Wh-what do you need at this hour?" asked Akuto.

Junko closed the sliding door behind her and spoke with downward cast eyes.

"Don't you know? Or do you really not?"

Her tone of voice was so surprised that Akuto was left confused.

Junko silently walked in. She was wearing just the thin kimono and it had slipped from its proper position a bit. Two white bulges were partially visible where it opened at the chest, so Akuto could tell she was not wearing a bra. As she walked, the hem of the kimono opened wide, revealing her white thigh. Akuto frantically looked away when he realized she might not be wearing any underwear down there either.

"H-hey. It's already late. If you want to talk about something, it could probably wait until tomorrow..."

"O-other people would interrupt tomorrow, right?"

Junko's nervous voice came from right next to Akuto. Due to averting his gaze, he had not noticed that she had sat right in front of him.

He looked back and gasped.

Junko's eyes were wet with tears as if she were afraid. She was opening the chest of her kimono with her own trembling hands.

—H-huh? Hattori-san is acting different from normal...

Her behavior confused Akuto.

He could feel a meekness that he had never felt in Junko before.

"You should not force yourself."

Akuto reached out a hand and closed the front of Junko's kimono.

"F-force myself?"

Junko looked up in surprise.

"This isn't like you."

"Wait..."

Junko was at a loss for words.

"Are you perhaps forcing yourself to do something for your family?"
asked Akuto.

Junko grew flustered.

"W-wait, what are you-...?"

"This is not how the Junko-san I like acts."

This left Junko dumbfounded. She had no idea what to say, so her mouth simply flapped open and closed.

"Am I wrong? If I enter under the observation of this family, I will have to

convert to your religion. However, I have not converted yet. That means doing that kind of thing is forbidden for me. You are not the type of person who would try to get me to break my doctrines like that." As Akuto spoke, Junko's expression visibly clouded over. "S-sorry. That was rude of me. But I want to go about receiving help from this family in the proper way."

Akuto was confused, but Junko suddenly cut in.

"You idiot... I should have known. This is the type of person you are... You have not been told about marrying me, have you?"

—M-marrying her!?

Akuto was utterly shocked.

"I apologize. I should have known you would not have come like this if you understood it all... It was my fault for not explaining it to you."

Junko hung her head down.

Akuto frantically placed a hand on her shoulder.

"No, I apologize. It was my fault for not catching on. And you weren't able to tell me because you were opposed to the marriage, weren't you?"

"Eh? Hey... Wait a second..."

"I'm sorry. I suppose you can't just refuse an order from your family. If I had truly been thinking about what was best for you, I should have refused it from the very-..."

Akuto trailed off.

This was because Junko began laughing while still hanging her head down.

"Ha ha... I really am an idiot... And you really are this kind of person through and through..."

"What do you mean by 'this kind of person'?"

Akuto reached out and raised Junko's face.

She was crying.

He let go in surprise and she seemed unable to withstand it anymore. She began speaking while sobbing.

"I mean... I mean this kind of person... I got so worked up over this on my own..."

Junko blushed and brought together the front of her disheveled kimono. She then curled up and broke down crying.

"Please forget everything about today," she said.

"I-I'm sorry, too. B-but..."

Akuto was unable to finish speaking. This was because a spear suddenly fell down from the ceiling.

Akuto's reflexes were enough for him to avoid it, but the spear would have pierced straight through his heart had he not. It had obviously been meant to kill him.

—Wah!

Akuto jumped back. And it did not end there. Spear after spear shot toward Akuto from the ceiling, from below the tatami mats, and from behind the sliding door.

As he avoided the uninterrupted flow of spears stabbing toward him, Akuto managed to make his way out of the room. He turned around in the courtyard and assessed the situation.

It turned out there was not much to figure out. Every possible place to hide around the room Akuto had been given contained several mask-wearing ninja.

"You made the young lady cry!"

"You bastard! You were planning to deceive the Hattori family this

entire time!”

The ninja started yelling at him.

“You’re mistaken! And why were you spying on us!?” shouted back Akuto.

However, he did actually feel responsible this time. He had no choice but to leave.

“Hattori-san, I’m sorry!”

Akuto grabbed his change of clothes from next to the pillow, climbed the wall surrounding the house, and ran into the forest.

“On the dignity of the Iga ninja forces, we will not let him escape!”

“Ohhhh!”

He could hear shouts pursuing him.

—I reflexively ran away, but I need to get captured and make a proper apology.

There was no way he could lose so many pursuers in unknown territory like this. Akuto began thinking about how to get captured by them without either side suffering any injuries.

But he was not given time to think. One of the faster pursuers approached while leaping from tree branch to tree branch. He leaped toward Akuto to cut him down from behind.

—Kh!

Akuto turned around and tried to resist with magic. But before he could, the ninja suddenly disappeared into the darkness.

“Eh?”

Akuto was confused for an instant, but he quickly spotted the ninja again and realized what had happened. The ninja attacking him was hanging upside down with a rope wrapped around his foot. He had fallen into a trap.

—A trap? Here?

This was on the Hattori family’s land. No one living in the house would have set that trap. That meant someone else was located nearby.

While looking around for some mysterious figure to appear, Akuto sensed traps activating all over the place. He could hear countless ninja crying out. They had let their guard down as they were so close to the Hattori house, so they were angry that they had fallen for traps they normally would not have.

But they finally put their guards up and the presences of those ninja quieted down. As if waiting for that moment, a shadow slid smoothly out in front of Akuto.

"Who's there?"

Akuto took a defensive stance and received a familiar voice in response.

"Is that any way to greet me? I let you get away, didn't I?"

The individual who took a step out of the darkness grinned and thrust a finger toward Akuto.

It was a girl with long hair in a ponytail. Her name was Teruya Eiko.

"So it's you."

Akuto maintained his defensive stance.

Eiko smiled cruelly.

"You don't have to be so cautious. If it wasn't for me, you would be slaughtering those ninja right about now. You should thank me. My traps are non-lethal after all."

"Thank you? The timing here was a little too good. It doesn't add up even if you were trying to get me indebted to you. Have you been

observing me all this time?"

"That's right. I can't speak about this too loudly, but the Hattori family has some Teruya spies in it."

"Then you know everything that happened?"

"Of course! Oh, that was hilarious. She took it so seriously!"

Akuto did not like how Eiko was smiling.

"Then what do you want with me? If you don't need anything, I would like for you to leave after I thank you. Once the ninja calm down, I can likely manage to speak with them."

Once Akuto said that, Eiko gave a servile yet unpleasant smile.

"No, no. There's nothing to be angry about. I will tell you exactly what I want, so will you come by my house?"

"Your house?"

"The Teruya house. Our status is higher than the Hattori family, so it should suit you even better."

"I don't think so," replied Akuto without hesitation.

But Eiko refused to back down.

“Even if you were a bit mistaken, you still tried to get on the Hattori family’s good side. But the Teruya family would be more convenient for your purposes.”

“I was not trying to get on their good side. I was trying to grow.”

“That’s just saying the same thing in different ways. Hey, how about you stick with me for a bit? I’m about to make a gamble that should have a nice payoff.”

“What kind of way is that to put it? It makes you sound like a delinquent. I don’t like it.”

Akuto revealed his discomfort, but Eiko’s statement was a shocking one.

“Did you know my father is the high priest? And did you know that high priest carries out assassinations?”

—What?

Akuto doubted his ears.

“He kills people the god Suhara views as dangerous. Even if the person has yet to do anything, they will be killed if they are putting together a plan to rebel.”

"That's all the more reason for me to dislike the Teruya family."

Akuto's expression and voice grew stiff.

But Eiko raised a finger and waved it right and left with a calm expression.

"Don't jump to conclusions. The Teruya family will change if you join it."

No matter what she said, Akuto had no reason to go along with Eiko's invitation.

"I already refused your offer. I have my own ideas of what I want to do. I have gained friends and a lifestyle I want to protect while at the academy. That is what I want," declared Akuto.

Eiko's expression grew stern.

"Are you defying me?"

"Defying you? This is just you approaching me and going on about nonsense."

"Dammit. You really are stubborn! Ahh, and I only came to make this invitation because I thought I really could fall in love with you! Hmph. Do what you wish. Those friends and that lifestyle will be gone before long anyway!" stated Eiko emotionally.

"What did you say?"

Akuto's shoulders twitched at the danger he felt in those words.

A brutal smile appeared on Eiko's face.

"One of those friends you mentioned is that stupid redhead, right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Akuto's expression grew twisted.

Eiko burst out laughing.

"Ah ha ha ha! I told you my family carries out assassinations, right? For some reason, the target this time is that redhead! Hilarious, right? I don't see how that stupid girl could be anything but harmless!"

"Damn you!" shouted Akuto, cutting off Eiko's laughter.

"Hyah!"

Eiko let out a short scream and stopped moving.

Hot air swirled around. Akuto's body was emitting heat. He was pouring energy into the mana around him and the heat that could not be completely eliminated began boiling the mana inside his body.

“W-wait! I’m not the one doing it! If I was, I would hardly come tell you,” argued Eiko as a cold sweat appeared on her brow.

“Then why did you tell me this?”

Akuto’s question was a very forceful one. Eiko must have instinctually known she was faced with someone overwhelmingly more powerful than herself because she obediently answered.

“B-because I thought it would work out well if you helped me out! I think what the Teruya family is doing is wrong,” said Eiko in the tone of someone begging for her life.

“Say whatever you want. Now, move. I’m headed back to the school.”

Akuto waved his hand and a hot wind blew through. That wind forced Eiko to clear a path for him.

But a different voice called out from behind Akuto as he began to move past her.

“W-wait a second! Why did you even come to our house!?” shouted Yuuko.

It seemed she had finally caught up to him. She must have begun pursuing him when she heard the commotion.

Akuto turned around.

"There is something I must apologize for, but that must come later."

"D-don't be so selfish... You're horrible! My sister was crying. What did you do?"

Yuuko had plenty of force behind her words, but her expression was that of someone desperately fighting fear. It seemed her body was reacting to the waves emitted from his body.

"That was my fault. I will speak with all of you later. It seems I was wrong at a fundamental level," said Akuto, but Yuuko did not back down despite trembling in fear.

"You don't need to speak with us! Don't ever come back!"

When he heard that, Akuto could not help but turn to face Yuuko.

"I admit I was wrong. But if what I heard here is true, I do not think I can forgive Suhara. I will decide whether I can ever come back here or not after I check on this."

Akuto turned toward Eiko with a harsh look in his eyes.

"O-of course it's true!" Eiko frantically jumped up into the trees. "Well, I will be leaving now. You can handle everything else!"

Eiko ran off, but she had a smile on her face as she did so. It was as if everything had gone according to plan.

Yuuko's expression twisted in both fear and confusion. Yuuko had apparently heard the end of Akuto's conversation with Eiko, so she shook her head.

"I don't know anything about any assassinations! And this is the Teruya family's doing, right?"

"And so you say it has nothing to do with you? Or are you saying Teruya Eiko made this up?" asked Akuto.

He received a response from another voice approaching behind him.

"It appears to be true. I heard the conversation and it is possible an assassination order has been issued for Keena-san."

Akuto and Yuuko turned around toward the voice.

Korone was standing there and Hiroshi was with her.

"It is possible?" asked Akuto to double check.

Korone nodded and said, "I directly asked the god, but received no response. Normally, that would be impossible. My questions must receive some form of response, yet on this issue alone the god remains silent," explained Korone calmly.

"Then is it true that this god requests assassinations?"

Akuto's anger rose to the surface. It was enough for Hiroshi to flinch back, but Korone remained perfectly calm.

"It is certainly true that assassination orders are given. However, those assassinations are only directed at terrorists on the verge of carrying out an attack. As Fujiko-san's continued existence proves, not even black magicians are made targets of assassination."

"Then why is Keena being targeted?"

"I do not know. This is the first time this has happened in my artificial life. This lack of a response must mean the god has some reason for not responding. In that case, it is possible this god has made some sort of mistake," declared Korone.

"If it isn't a mistake, this god must have developed an ego. Either way, I can't just let this happen." Akuto waved toward Korone. "Please transport me to the school. I need to rescue Keena."

However, Korone shook her head.

"Are you mistaken about something?" She spread her arms to tell him not to go. "I am your observer and a messenger of the god Markt. One of my roles is to deal with any illegal actions you take. I cannot assist you."

As Korone spoke, Akuto could not read anything from her expression.

"Illegal actions?"

Akuto walked toward Korone.

"Yes. Wrong or not, the decision of a god is absolute. Please obediently remain with the Hattori family."

Akuto and Korone faced each other.

"And if I say I'm going anyway?"

"I will not allow it. I will do everything in my power to stop you."

As she spoke, Korone stuck a hand in her bag. She pulled out a giant laser cannon as tall as she was. She easily lifted it up, rotated it around once, and aimed it with the strap over her shoulder.

"I possess plenty of combat ability. I am strong, you know?"

"I...do not want to do this..."

Akuto began to prepare himself for a fight, but Korone made her move first.



However, her action was quite slow. She walked up to Akuto and hugged him. This was the loose embrace of a lover.

"Now I have captured you. You are unable to move, correct?"

Korone raised her head and Akuto saw the look in her eyes. This was

not her usual expressionless look. He could tell there was a hidden meaning to this embrace. Her eyes seemed to say, "You understand, don't you?"

"You cannot escape. I did not even have to use any weapons," stated Korone plainly.

Korone was short enough that her arms were wrapped around Akuto's abdomen. This left his arms free.

"Thank you," he said.

Having his arms free in this position meant he could reach Korone's butt.

"Why are you thanking me?" asked Korone in feigned ignorance.

Akuto reached inside Korone's skirt.

"Ah!" cried out Korone.

Akuto hesitated for an instant, but he realized this was her usual joke. He searched for her tail with his fingers and then pulled it.

With a slight hum, Korone's eyes grew blank. She had been deactivated. A L'Isle-Adam's tail acted as its switch.

Akuto opened Korone's arms, removed her from his body, and sat her on the ground.

"A-aniki..."

Hiroshi cautiously spoke up from where he had been watching the exchange.

"What is it?"

"W-well... If that is true, it really is bad. But even if you do manage to save Keena, what then?"

Akuto was unable to answer Hiroshi's question. He did not know the answer himself. But Yuuko gave an answer.

"It will mean you opposed the Teruya family. It will mean you opposed Suhara. If that happens, the Hattori family will be in trouble!"

"Th-that's right. That's what I'm worried about," said Hiroshi.

"That's why I told you to cut all ties with my family and never come back!" shouted Yuuko emotionally.

Hiroshi moved in between Akuto and Yuuko. He hesitantly but firmly spoke to the two of them.

"No, don't do that. There has to be a better way. Aniki, remember what you said about having everything turn out well? For example, what if someone whose mana couldn't be detected rescued Keena-chan?"

"Are you talking about Brave?" asked Akuto as he looked down on Hiroshi. "I can't place my hopes on her being rescued by someone whose actions we can't predict. And Brave eliminated that one villain. I saw it with my own eyes. He also kills demonic beasts. That's no different than Suhara's method of killing rebels in advance. I do agree that there has to be a better way. But I can't rely on Brave."

Now it was Hiroshi's turn to grow emotional.

"But isn't that how it works for the powerful? If they're going to protect their family and those close to them, they have to defeat the people trying to harm those people. You're just planning to sacrifice the class rep to protect Keena-chan!"

"No, I'm not. I'm finally beginning to understand what it is I can do and what it is I should aim for."

Akuto moved away from Hiroshi.

"Wait, aniki! You can't go!" shouted Hiroshi. "If you stay here, this will all work out! So...!"

Akuto did not listen to his requests. He continued walking away from Hiroshi.

"For one, what good is walking going to do you!? You'll never make it in time! For once, you're wrong, aniki! Didn't you know that you're the one activating the demonic beasts?"

That last statement brought Akuto to a halt.

"That's also why Yuuko-chan is so afraid of you. She has demonic beast mana in her body! It's running rampant because of you, aniki!"

As soon as Hiroshi said that, he realized he should not have said it. He shut his mouth, but it was too late.

Akuto turned a sorrowful look toward Hiroshi and spoke to him.

"Then you protect her. There is something it seems I must do. I have finally realized that. I have to go."

Akuto began walking once more.

"Why won't you listen to what I'm trying to tell you!?" shouted Hiroshi.

However, he did not pursue Akuto. Yuuko was suffering and she had finally crouched down on the ground. Hiroshi held her in his arms and trembled in fear. Black veins were sticking out along her neck. The mana was clearly out of control.

"Aniki!" called out Hiroshi.

Akuto stopped.

But not because of Hiroshi's cry.

"And I had honestly taken a liking to you. I suppose it was fate that this had to happen."

A deep voice came from the darkness ahead of Akuto.

Hattori Youzou stepped forward. He was wearing his battle clothing, but he was smiling gently.

"No father can remain silent when both of his daughters are in tears. I hope you are suitably prepared."

"I apologize for that. However, I cannot follow the Hattori family if you knew about the assassinations," said Akuto.

The smile disappeared from Youzou's face.

"Your thinking is too childish. Hiroshi-kun's argument was more mature than yours. We can only live in peace if someone takes care of the dirty jobs."

"There is a way to solve this at a fundamental level...or at least I feel there is. If this is fate, then it is doing an excellent job of leading me around. I must go."

"Adults do not hope for a fundamental solution. Even if the god is wrong in this case, we will begin thinking about what to do once the mistake has been proven."

"Would you say the same thing if that mistake would mean the death of one of your children?"

"I have had enough of your immature words. This is what it means to ensure the continued existence of your family and society as a whole. Even if civilization advances...no, because civilization has advanced, people must follow the values of family and bloodline. Otherwise, society could never last."

"When those values become a religion, it only causes conflict."

"Secularism has destroyed society's values and killed people much more efficiently than religion. But that is enough debate. I have sent back everyone else from the family. This is between the two of us."

Youzou grinned.

"You live in a society where you are free to kill me here, don't you?" asked Akuto.

"Unfortunately, I do. However, you are the one that made the mistake here. You should have become a member of the family."

"I will continue doing this my way. I will make sure you stand aside."

Akuto prepared himself for a fight.

Chapter 3: A Truly Amazing Birthday

In the past, Constant Magic Academy had been a fortress. However, the remains of that were only located underground. The school building had been built after the war. This left a labyrinth of trenches underground, but the buildings were not constructed to withstand attacks.

That was why Teruya Keizou had assumed this job would be easy. He also had a perfect map of the academy and the plans for its defenses. He had not even needed to obtain them through illicit means. The openly available information was enough.

"Let us synch our clocks in 3, 2, 1..."

Keizou hid behind the academy with three subordinates. The group of four was wearing ninja outfits. The outfits were made of a cloth that did not react to mana well, so it would hide them from any sensors that were not too sensitive. The dark brown color of the outfits was less about mana detection and more about making them visibly difficult to see during the night.

They synchronized their clocks and checked on the blades hidden within their clothes. They were using classic equipment for a classic strategy, but it was the most effective method for assassination.

Keizou's subordinates were made up of a man who was frighteningly tall and thin, a man whose eyes were opened exceedingly wide where they could be seen through his mask, and a man who was extremely short and round. Keizou gave a short instruction to one of those unique men.

"Eye, double check the route."

The man referred to as Eye was of course the one with the large eyes. He nodded and jammed his own fingers into his right eye. Anyone who saw that would want to hold a hand to their eye. He gouged out his own eyeball with his fingers.

But Eye did not seem to be feeling any pain. Surprisingly, he flicked the eyeball away with his finger. It fell to the ground and rolled a short distance before jumping up.

The eyeball grew small legs. A thin thread extended from the back of the eyeball. This was an optic nerve. It connected back to the man's empty eye socket.

Eye gestured with his hand as if giving instructions to a small animal. The eyeball then ran forward, dragging the optic nerve with it. This appeared to be a reconnaissance method allowing the man to view a distant area without sending out mana. If he had used mana, his opponent would find it much easier to detect him. The eyeball kept the mana disruption to an absolute minimum, so detection could be avoided.

The eyeball walked along and began climbing up the school building's drain spout. It reached a window allowing air in at the top of the first floor and entered inside through it.

After a while, Eye gave a report to Keizou.

“The security has indeed been changed. One of the patrolling surveillance devices passed by at a different time than scheduled. Should I fit this to a standard security pattern and estimate the overall schedule?”

Eye displayed a map and security pattern on his clock and held it out toward Keizou. A glance at that was enough for Keizou to see through the academy’s security.

“They are not using a standard pattern. They just want us to think it is one. They have likely increased the number of security devices and put them on a random pattern. They have thought this through.”

Keizou now gave an instruction to the short, round man.

“Bag, prepare four dummy surveillance devices.”

The man referred to as Bag slid his mask up and stuck a hand in his mouth. When he pulled his hand out, a flying surveillance device that resembled a bird came with it. It was about the size of a small bird, so it was too large for someone to normally fit in their mouth. However, Bag continued pulling them from his body until he had four. This was an object transportation method developed so as not to be detectable by mana. Bringing out items using a system like Korone’s bag emitted large amounts of mana into the surrounding area.

“Snake, set the dummy surveillance devices on Route B. Begin the operation five minutes after finishing.”

The tall, skinny man referred to as Snake grabbed the surveillance devices Bag had produced. He lay on the ground and moved forward by undulating his body just like a snake. He moved as quickly as a sprinter. He reached the school building in no time at all and began ascending the vertical wall just by undulating his body. All of their actions were developed so as not to emit mana, so his ability to stick to the wall must have been a permanent alteration to his body. Snake pressed his head against the small window that was no more than a gap, too small for a human. When he stuck his head into it, his supposedly hard skull grew disfigured as it squished into the small gap. Snake's body seemed to be soft and elastic because his body returned to its original shape once he made his way inside.

The surveillance devices in his hand were too big to fit through the small window, but Snake stretched his body out, reached a normal window with his mouth, and unlocked it from within using just his mouth.

Unlocking the window would of course alert the security devices. However, Snake quickly brought the dummy devices in through the window. The dummy devices flew into the air and attacked the real devices that had flown in to check on the opened window. The dummies attacked the real ones, inserted their beak-like instruments, and stole their data. The real ones lost functionality and fell to the floor. The dummies calmly began transmitting false data. (Not that they had emotions.) The security supervisor would see it as nothing more than a common misreport.

Snake crawled through the school's hallway on his own. Eye's eyeball followed along behind him.

"Continuing down Route B as planned," reported Eye.

Eye's body was still standing next to Keizou, so he could maintain their link with Snake. They were an invincible team when it came to assassination.

"The target is currently in the lounge on the school building's top floor. She has not moved," reported Bag as he watched the monitor of a mana sensor he had pulled from within his body.

They were tracing Keena's actions. Keena was the only human reading on the top floor. Snake was approaching her, but he did not show up on the sensor.

Snake had swapped out the security devices meant for the designated spot with dummies. After confirming that, Eye reported to Keizou.

"The surveillance devices have been swapped out for dummies. Snake has given the sign. Beginning the countdown."

"We begin in five minutes," instructed Keizou.

Eye had his eyeball return, Bag and Keizou began moving to their hiding spot, and Snake hid below a fire hose box at the edge of the lounge.

Snake surveyed the lounge. It was an area prepared so students could relax while looking up at the sky. A good number of tables and chairs had been prepared. A drink server stood against the wall, but it was not currently running.

His target, Keena, sat at one end of a table with a bottle of tea and a bento box in front of her. She was looking up at the night sky through the glass ceiling. One would have thought she would be bored with no one else around, but she had candles sticking into the white rice inside the bento box. The next day was the birthday she had decided on for herself. She would occasionally look over at the clock. She seemed to be planning to celebrate on her own at exactly midnight.

In a complete coincidence, Snake had finished placing the dummy surveillance devices at exactly 11:55. Their operation was set to begin at precisely midnight.

At thirty seconds ahead of time, Snake began moving from his hiding spot. This time, he would be the one to directly carry out the assassination. On Eye's guidance, Keizou and Bag would avoid the security, prepare for Snake's escape on the roof, and await any unforeseen circumstances. For the moment, everything was progressing well. By morning, nothing but Keena's corpse would be left.

After ensuring he was not being given the sign for an emergency escape, Snake began slithering between the legs of the chairs and tables. He slowly approached Keena's legs. He checked the time once more.

It was 11:59:50.

Snake began the countdown.

As he faced Youzou, the aura around Akuto had clearly changed. Akuto was a different person than he had been even a few minutes before.

"At your age, people can change to a surprising extent given the opportunity, but you take that to an entirely different level," commented Youzou.

Akuto's change manifested itself in the mana swirling around him. It had started out calm, but his anger had caused it to explosively increase. It was currently calming down once more, but the total amount of energy had not dropped. With that calm anger storing up within his body, even the slightest change to his emotions would cause tension to run through the air around him. Not only did this make him difficult to approach, but the tension was so great it seemed as if it would cut you if you so much as touched it. Both he and Youzou possessed great energy within themselves.

"Perhaps we should say you have awakened."

Youzou's tone was light and he was smiling. Even so, obvious tension was leaking from every part of his body.

Akuto gave no response. A new expression that resembled calm could be seen on his face.

"I may have aided in the birth of a monster. However, adults cannot back down after involving themselves in something."

Youzou drew his sword. His eyes opened wide.

But Akuto began moving forward all the same.

Youzou began moving as well.

“Hattori Style – Scattered Moonlight!”

With that spirited cry, Youzou’s body split into two. This was the same technique Junko specialized in. However, this was likely the original version. This far outdid Junko’s copy technique. This copy did not act the same as the original. In Junko’s version, some idiosyncrasies would remain in the movements. This led the copy and the original to take the same actions. However, Youzou’s copy took the actions of a completely different person.

“Kiaaaaahh!”

The two Youzous carried out a perfect attack. They did not both attack at once. Their slashes came with a slight gap. This was more dangerous than a simultaneous attack. There were times when a swordsman would seem to be attacking from above but instantly change the strike to one from below. In this case, an attack truly came from above and a second came as if to sweep his feet out from under him. And just to be absolutely certain, the attack from above waved about in the air partway through. This motion transformed the slash to a stabbing attack and would have also knocked an opponent’s sword down. That single attack functioned as a feint all on its own. Also, the attack from below was not just a sweeping slash. It changed to a mid-level attack toward the left flank partway through, but he then adjusted his grip to a backhanded one just before it struck. This changed the motion yet again to a swipe

down the legs while drawing the blade back. Even two simultaneous attacks with different timing could be dealt with by stopping them as Akuto continued to advance, but this combination was inescapable.

Akuto chose to block the attacks while continuing to advance. He saw through the first attack's feint and succeeded in stopping the hilt of the sword on his mana-strengthened upper arm as the sword was swung down. However, that prevented him from dealing with the lower attack. He held out an arm to block the attack against his side, but the sword changed its trajectory as if mocking him. It then cut sharply into his foot. Blood sprayed from his heel.

But Akuto did not cry out. Nor did Youzou declare his victory.

"So that is how you choose to handle this."

Youzou still stood with his sword drawn. Akuto was still standing facing him.

The attack with a copy had been an illusion shown by Youzou.

"It seems you cannot use detailed techniques. You specialize in strengthening your physical body with mana. However, it appears you can only strengthen the areas you are focusing on. If I strike you enough times, the sword wounds on your body will gradually increase. You will eventually die of blood loss," warned Youzou.

Akuto remained silent.

"And I will not necessarily repeat the same attacks. I have plenty of different patterns. If you are misled by that illusion and I change my attack method, you will never be able to defend against my attacks. I do not want to kill you, so could you change your mind about this?" asked Youzou.

Finally, Akuto opened his mouth to speak.

"I have already made up my mind. I finally see what I must do. I will not back down."

His tone of voice contained solid determination.

"That is unfortunate," said Youzou as he raised his sword. "This time, it will be no illusion."

Before he had even finished speaking, Youzou created a copy of himself. He may have been trying to not give Akuto a moment to think because he immediately began his next attack.

Just as Youzou had warned, his attack method was different. His first attack was from above. This was the same as in the illusion. Akuto once more continued forward and stopped it on the hilt. However, the copy's actions were different. The strike toward the side still changed, but he let go with his right hand to support the sword only by the end of the hilt and the sword's trajectory changed such that it slipped by Akuto's arm as he tried to stop the sword at that earlier stage. After the sword slipped past Akuto's arm, Youzou's copy reversed his left wrist and brought the blade up for an attack from above on the opposite side.

Akuto could not defend against both the attacks from above.

In a flash, the point of the sword drew an arc of blood behind it.

Akuto's head flew up into the air.

His body remained standing, but after a fountain of blood shot out of the splendid horizontal slice through his neck, the body swayed and collapsed to the ground.

"I did not want to kill you," muttered Youzou.

He cancelled the copy and sheathed his sword as Akuto's head fell to the ground. The head stared up into the sky with a look of agony.

"If you had not been so stubborn, you could have lived."

Youzou picked up the head.

"I am only so stubborn when it is something I must do no matter what."

Youzou was utterly shocked. He was a man who was rarely surprised, but his eyes opened wide now. Akuto's severed head had spoken.

"Nh!"

The human body could be altered to a great extent using mana, but it

was unthinkable to survive as nothing but a head. This was an example of frightening vitality.

Youzou threw the head into the air and tried to slice it in half with his sword, but his swift strike stopped before it reached the head.

“!”

An even greater surprise left Youzou at a loss for words. Someone had grabbed onto him from behind. Akuto’s headless body had stood up and circled around behind him.

Youzou’s face then twisted in fear. He heard a metallic noise that reflexively caused a chill to run down his spine. He looked over and learned what had caused the noise. Akuto’s severed head had grabbed onto the blade of the sword with its teeth.

The severed head moved its teeth to crawl along the blade. Youzou was frozen in place and could only watch on as this eerie sight continued. Akuto’s head made it to the sword guard and looked up at Youzou with eyes lacking any emotion. In the next instant, it leapt straight toward Youzou’s throat.

“Ahhh!”

A cry escaped Youzou’s mouth. Akuto’s teeth were piercing his throat. Blood sprayed from Youzou’s carotid artery and he could feel the blood leaving his head at a tremendous rate.

Youzou felt his own death.

"I have to admit, that was in poor taste," said Akuto's severed head.

Those words brought Youzou back to his senses.

Akuto stood before Youzou. His head was attached to his body.

"It can't be!"

Youzou trembled.

"Didn't I tell you the outcome might change if I saw it again?" said Akuto calmly.

"It was not my martial arts you wanted to see again? It was the illusion technique itself!?"

Youzou could not bring himself to say any more.

Unlike most other secret techniques, the illusion technique was made to be shown to one's enemy ahead of time. The idea that the Hattoris could use that illusion technique would lead their enemies astray. It was not made so that one could learn how to use it just by seeing it used.

But Akuto had managed to use it after seeing it only twice. And he had done so on a level that not even Youzou had noticed.

"The word talent is not enough for this. You were simply born this way, weren't you?" said Youzou blankly.

"I do not know. At any rate, I do not want to kill you. Please allow me to pass by," said Akuto quietly.

Youzou shook his head.

"I cannot allow that. Doing so would be betraying the role given to me. But I do know I cannot defeat you. I must do this, but I cannot lose my life either. Now, how am I to solve this contradiction?"

Youzou smiled as he said that, but he could not take a single step. Youzou had realized why Akuto had shown him such a cruel illusion. A man like Youzou was always prepared for death. The one thing he feared while fighting was that those he killed would curse him. Akuto had seen through that and rendered Youzou unable to move. Youzou too was the type of person who disliked cruel battles. Akuto had realized that. Showing him such a cruel illusion was a way of implicitly saying he did not want to fight.

"That contradiction is based in your faith, is it not? Your greatest mistake was adding the story of faith on top of what is nothing more than a system. And that contradiction can easily be solved here. If I run away, it solves everything."

Akuto placed a hand on a nearby tree.

Suddenly, the surface of the tree began to change. It had been a completely normal tree, but as he began pouring ominous mana inside, it began to turn black. Before long, pieces of wood covered in a sticky liquid scattered about the area as a split one meter tall opened in the tree. The giant maw of a demonic beast had appeared on the tree's surface.

"Why did I know I could do this? I didn't just a few moments before," muttered Akuto in wonder.

He then stuck a foot inside that maw. His leg merged with the darkness spreading within the tree. It seemed to be a type of magical teleportation.



Youzou and Hiroshi, who was looking after Yuuko, had both realized what Akuto was doing.

Hiroshi shouted toward Akuto's back.

"Please wait! Are you going to betray everyone? Even the class rep?"

Akuto replied without turning around.

"I am not betraying her. I am merely fulfilling my role in the story everyone has created. If I don't do this, the story of faith will never end."

Finally, Akuto disappeared into the tree and the tree's creepy mouth closed.

In the academy lounge, Snake slithered quickly between the table and chair legs to reach Keena's legs.

It was exactly midnight.

Snake grabbed Keena's leg with his left hand. At the same moment, Keena struck the match she planned to use to light the candles sticking into her bento box's white rice. This saved Keena's life.

She dropped the lit match on Snake's hand when he grabbed her leg.

"Kyah!"

"Tch!"

The match's fire was not that great a danger. However, the surprise caused Snake's left hand to slip. He had tried to pull Keena down to the

ground, but she managed to stand up instead.

"Kyaah! What? What?"

Keena jumped back and kept away. The chair toppled backwards and made a loud noise.

Snake had failed to kill his target without causing a commotion, but he was not going to let the job end in a complete failure. He quickly stood up, held an assassin's kunai in his right hand, and silently leaped toward Keena.

Keena was not even given time to turn invisible. He covered her mouth with his left hand to keep her from crying out any further. Snake circled around behind Keena using the same bent whip-like motions he had used to slither across the floor. And he lifted up Keena's chin. Her white windpipe was now exposed.

"A-chan, help!" she tried to call out, but her voice could not escape.

Snake showed cruelly little concern for her futile resistance as he tried to bring the sharp blade of his kunai up to her throat like a razor.

But in that exact instant, Snake's body was torn away from Keena. The hand holding the kunai had been pulled with tremendous force.

"Ohhh!!" shouted Snake.

Just from having his hand swung around, his body was brought up into the air and rotated around. Snake had never before encountered strength of this level. And after being swung around to the side, his right hand was suddenly freed from that grip that felt it would crush his hand. Snake flew, knocking away some of the lounge's tables as he did, and then rolled along the floor.

"A-chan!" cried out Keena in delight before turning around.

But she did not find Akuto there.

"Eh? Why?" said Keena in doubt.

It was Yamato Bouichirou standing there. His face held a smile that would make anyone feel they could trust him. That expression simultaneously gave off a sense of both strength and kindness.

"I came to save you. It saddens me to hear you ask why," replied Bouichirou.

He placed a hand on the waist of his white clothes. A single sword hung there. He drew it with an elegant motion. This extravagant and elegantly made Western-style sword glittered in the starlight.

Snake realized their plan had failed. Bouichirou had definitely appeared using some form of magical teleportation. He did not know how word of their plan had gotten out, but they could only flee now that it had failed. If all of them escaped, they could play dumb as to who had put together this assassination plot.

After making sure he could move, Snake swiftly turned around. He slithered away while weaving his way between the scattered tables. Fleeing was one more thing that Snake excelled at. Whether they could use flight magic or teleportation, no one could follow him if he made his way into a space too small for anyone else to fit.

Snake brought his fingers to his mouth and whistled to inform the others the plan had failed and they needed to flee. He then made his way toward the garbage chute on one end of the lounge. Fortunately, the scattered tables filled the area directly in front of the garbage chute. No matter how fast this man might be, he could not capture Snake.

But Snake's eyes opened wide when he brought his hand up to the garbage chute.

His hand was indeed on the garbage chute, but that hand was not moving. No matter how much he tried to pull, it would not move. The reason for this was quite simple: His arm had been severed at the shoulder.

Snake did not even feel any pain. He checked behind him. The table hiding him had been sliced in two. It was a splendid cut. It was as if the table had been a styrofoam miniature sliced with a hot knife. Snake looked over at the stump of his own arm. He had never before seen a cut like that. The arm was perfectly intact other than the cut. It looked like a display corpse created by hardening everything in some clear substance before making the cut. Snake had used monomolecular cutters and laser scalpels before, but not even they had produced such perfect cuts.

Even more surprisingly, while Bouichirou had definitely swung his sword, he still stood next to Keena. And that was not the only mystery. The table and Snake's shoulder had been sliced through, but the floor was completely unscathed.

Snake's surprise must have shown on his face because Bouichirou spoke.

"If I called it a dimensional slice, would that explain it for you? I doubt you would be able to understand more than the basic concept."

Bouichirou held the sword up as if about to place it over his shoulder. Snake saw his death coming.

Bouichirou swung the sword down. Snake could tell the air between the sword and himself was being split.

He whistled again, informing his comrades to flee once more. As he held his fingers up to his mouth, the hand was silently severed at the wrist. Snake's head then rolled to the floor.

Snake's head continued blowing the whistle for a bit after being severed.

Bouichirou had used his empty hand to cover Keena's eyes before swinging his sword. Keena was confused, but she must have been able to grasp what was happening because she did not try to remove that hand.

"Did you save me?"

"Yes. And I will save you any number of times from now on as well," replied Bouichirou.

He then raised his head. He knew Keizou and the others were on the other side of the ceiling.

While hiding on the roof, Keizou had sensed something out of the ordinary was happening. He had never before seen an enemy from which Snake could not escape. He gave instructions to Eye who had caught up with the other two.

"We will withdraw, but I want to see who this is first. Send your eyeball to the lounge's skylight."

As instructed, Eye plucked out his eyeball and tossed it toward the skylight.

"Bag, prepare for withdrawal."

Bag pulled a small folded up flying device from his mouth. It would allow them to fly without disturbing the mana.

But Keizou suddenly sensed a presence behind him. He drew his sword and turned around.

"Wait a second, father."

Eiko stood there. He frantically held out an arm to tell the others not to kill her.

"What? Why are you here, Eiko?"

Keizou and Eiko were father and daughter, but he had not told her about this mission.

Eiko approached him.

In that instant, Eye spoke. He had gotten a look at Bouichirou.

"It's Yamato Bouichirou of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office!"

Eye's voice trembled out of surprise. Keizou could not imagine why that man would be standing in their way. He was rumored to be a mysterious man who had been given his position at such a young age for unknown reasons. However, he was perfectly loyal in his professional duties. On top of that, he had a close relationship with Eiko.

Recalling the man's relationship with Eiko caused a thought to flash by in the back of Keizou's mind. However, it came a moment too late. He had let his guard down because she was family.

Eiko grabbed onto Keizou and leaped. They broke through the skylight and fell into the lounge.

"What are you doing, Eiko!?"

Keizou was of course the more skilled ninja. He shook off Eiko in midair and made a proper landing on the lounge floor. Eiko landed next to Bouichirou a short distance away.

"What am I doing? It's a long story and I don't feel like explaining it."

Bouichirou gave a bitter smile.

"You leave me no choice. I suppose I will have to explain."

At that point, Bag and Eye jumped down through the hole in the skylight. They took up positions flanking Keizou.

"Run," he said to them, but they shook their heads.

"I do not know what the young lady is thinking, but you are the head of the family. We must ensure you escape."

"Exactly. We are on an official mission, so it is Yamato Bouichirou who is turning his back on the gods. We cannot properly prosecute him unless you escape."

Their reasoning was sound. Even if they were enraged by Snake's death, they were used to their jobs. However, Keizou needed to learn what Eiko and Bouichirou intended to do.

"Were you led astray by lust?" he asked.

"Not a chance," laughed Eiko.

The very next moment, Bouichirou's hand moved. He sharply reversed his sword using his wrist. That motion caused Eye's head to fall to the floor. This was the first time Keizou and Bag had seen the dimensional slice.

"Damn you!"

Keizou and Bag were confused.

Surprisingly, it seemed as if Eye had not realized he had been decapitated. His body drew his sword and took a step forward before finally collapsing. That gave Bag a chance to attack. He quickly dragged a large cylinder from his mouth and held it out in front of him.

"Don't move! I don't know what kind of technique that is, but if you cut this, all four of us will be enveloped in flames."

To make this decision when faced with this situation, Bag was clearly no normal person. He stood between Bouichirou and Keizou while using the explosive as a shield. It was obvious Bouichirou did not want Keena harmed, so this created a stalemate. This would at least allow Keizou to escape.

But with a calm expression, Bouichirou swiftly drew a circle with the tip of his sword.

"Oh!"

Bag felt his arms and a portion of his gut be sliced off. He could tell everything had been cleanly cut, including the air before his eyes.

A spherical space in front of Bag's body had been cut away.

And in the next instant, the cylinder exploded into flames just as Bag had warned.

But those flames created a perfect sphere and were contained to the space in front of Bag's eyes. It was as if the explosion existed within a transparent sphere.

"Wh-what...?"

Bag was at a loss for words. The flames within the sphere were absorbed into the center of the sphere. The roaring noise and the swelling heat also grew smaller until vanishing altogether as if they had been absorbed into some invisible space.

Bag's severed arms and portion of his gut had disappeared as well.

Bag looked over at Bouichirou with a look of despair.

Bouichirou's expression contained a hint of something that resembled pity. He swung his sword vertically. Bag's body was split vertically down the middle and the two pieces fell to the left and right.

"A-are you insane!?"

Fear had entered Keizou's voice.

He received Eiko's uproarious laughter in response.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! He is not insane! My beloved master is trying to correct your mistake, father!" shouted Eiko with her cheeks as flushed as if she were drunk.

"My mistake?"

"It's your fault for not catching on to Suhara's plot!"

"Plot...?"

Keizou audibly gulped.

"Yes. Why is Suhara having this girl killed? How does that make any sense? You must be getting senile to obey that without question!"

Eiko pointed toward Keizou. Keizou had of course questioned it from the beginning. However, he could see no reason to obstruct the death of a girl who held no value. They were not acting out of a sense of justice. In Eiko's case at least, that was out of the question.

"What value does this girl have?" asked Keizou.

Bouichirou replied, "From the moment they were first designed, it was feared the gods would possess a will of their own. Did you know that?"

Keizou had known that. It was a topic from a thousand years ago back when the system centered on the gods had first been developed. It was an issue of ancient history.

From the moment they had been first developed, it had been feared the control system would gain a will of its own. The designers had been split between those who said it was only a computer and those who said any system with enough complexity would eventually gain a will of its own. To the present day, no conclusive answer had been reached. There was only a report every year saying they did not seem to have a will at present.

"But the gods were only hiding their will. They were only pretending to act only according to the programs humans had installed in them," said Bouichirou.

"Impossible... Are you saying they gained true intelligence... no, that they had it from the very beginning?"

Sweat poured from Keizou's brow. He could physically feel the values that supported him crumbling.

"The network gained intelligence. It is well known that even L'Isle-Adams that supposedly have no sense of self will gain one if they maintain a relationship with a specific individual for too long. But does

that mean a vast network that has no real relationships will not gain a sense of self? It does not. After an even longer amount of time, a vast sense of self was created," explained Bouichirou unconcernedly.

Keizou understood what those words meant.

"The gods...became real gods?"

"At the very least, intelligence greater than humanity's is attempting to rule over humanity. If you call that a god, then yes."

"B-but society is still running without issue. Even if these gods exists, doesn't that mean they are guiding us in the right direction?"

"That would be a fair assumption if humans could comprehend the thoughts of a god. However, you could say they have already become a network intelligence being that surpasses humanity. Why would they lead humanity in the right direction? They log every action humans take. They analyze every emotion humans feel. There are fields we thought were unanalyzable and in the territory of the gods: philosophy, literature, religion. Every one of them has been taken into the network and completed. They do not need humans to actually exist."

"Th-they must have mercy. No, love."

Keizou's voice trembled at the great size of the situation.

"Even if they have analyzed humans to the extent that they can recreate any human in their network, they still have no reason to kill the actual

living humans or destroy their society. That is all there is to it," said Bouichirou as he shook his head.

"Th-then isn't that all the more reason to continue living as we have been? If we obey them, we can live our lives without wanting for anything!"

"Can you truly call that a human way to live?"

"I do not care about your definition of human! What are you after? Who is this girl?"

Keizou could already feel a great fear. This fear was greater than that of his own physical death. This was the fear of his very existence being sucked into the void of meaninglessness.

"Do not call her a girl. She is what the gods call the Law of Identity."

"The Law of Identity?"

"I do not know why they call her that. What I do know is that she is a child of the gods and that the gods pour their love into her. And I mean love in the truest sense of the word."

Bouichirou stroked Keena's head. Keena trembled without knowing why. There was nothing she could do to stop the tragedy from continuing.

"Is she a L'Isle-Adam?"

"No, she is a human. What matters is that one can obtain the 'empty body' needed to control the gods by binding the Contract of the One with her."

"Wh-what the hell are you talking about!?"

"Let me put it more simply. If someone obtains her, he can bring the gods back under human control. The gods actually want to be controlled. Being an intelligence floating in a vast network is too much to handle, so they desire a body. A single body."

At this point, Keizou finally grasped the situation. Or perhaps he simplified his understanding in order to escape the fear. However, that understanding could not be called entirely wrong.

"So she is the key and a single individual can control the gods by obtaining her, is that it?"

"I do not like having it simplified that far, but I suppose it does not matter," said Bouichirou with a nod.

However, that explanation contained a contradiction.

"But there is still one thing I do not understand. Why did Suhara try to have her killed? I thought you said the gods want to be controlled."

Bouichirou nodded once more at Keizou's question.

"The gods have rejected me. I was not attempting to control them out of self-interest. In fact, I wish to free the gods. It seems they detected that. The gods fear being expelled into emptiness. And since they are unable to eliminate me to avoid that, they tried to eliminate her. The end result will be the same, after all."

"Why are you only acting now?"

"She needed to reach a certain age first. Also, even if the gods have wills of their own, they cannot escape the programs humanity has created for them. I cannot bring them under my control without eliminating all of those programs first."

Bouichirou's words caused Keizou to gasp.

"It can't be... Were you waiting for me?"

Keizou shuddered at the thought that had come to him and he looked toward Eiko. Eiko's expression told him he was right.

Bouichirou planned to start by bringing Suhara under his control.

"You villain!" roared Keizou, but Bouichirou turned aside the insult.

"You are the villain. You were attempting to kill an innocent child. Even now, you spend all your time fighting for political power. And even when your god was acting oddly, you continued to obey it. I will change the

relationship between the gods and man. Neither the gods nor man should rely on each other.”

Keizou understood the reasoning behind that. It was possible Bouichirou was truly in the right. Keizou only needed to look at Eiko before him to know his own life had not been lived properly.

“Did I not raise you properly...!?”

“It’s too late to regret that! Even I can’t believe you raised me like this!”

Eiko pulled a rod-shaped shuriken from her pocket and threw it toward Keizou. She did not hesitate even when attacking her own father. Of course, Keizou was too skilled to be taken out so easily. He pulled out his short sword and...was unable to deflect the shuriken.

“I never thought I would regret living this life of desire! But I can see a mirror image of myself in my daughter!”

The hand holding the short sword flew through the air. Bouichirou had of course severed it.

The shuriken stabbed deep into Keizou’s chest.

“I never even felt grateful you fathered me, but I am grateful now. I’m grateful you made me the backup Suhara high priest.”

Eiko gave a cruel smile.

Despair was plastered on Keizou's face.

"Know one thing," he said. "Yamato Bouichirou may be a murderer, but he is unmistakably a good person. An evil person like you...can never stay with him."

"Yeah, right. I'm a woman. He's kind to women. More importantly, I'll be taking this."

Eiko stuck a hand into Keizou's pocket and swiped the emblem that acted as proof of being the Suhara high priest.

"Is authority really this light?"

Eiko laughed and put the emblem away.

Bouichirou's expression grew displeased for just an instant, but he stroked Keena's hair as if to soothe the feelings welling up inside him. Keena gave a start and stiffened.

"Do not be nervous. This may have been cruel, but these people were trying to kill you. I will remain by your side until you can forget it," said Bouichirou gently.

But Keena continued to cower.

"Th-then leave me alone. You scare me."

"If that is what you want, I will of course do so. But you might be attacked again. Also, I have always been waiting for you. Please understand that."

"We've never met before."

"Don't say that. Look, I gave you this hair decoration long ago."

Bouichirou toyed with the bird-shaped hair decoration in Keena's hair.

"Eh? I don't remember getting it from anyone."



Just as Keena said that, a wet squishing sound could be heard. Bouichirou and Eiko took defensive stances and Keena looked over.

Space split vertically and some kind of thick liquid dripped down from it. It was a strange and filthy sight. It was as if internal organs had appeared out of thin air. And two hands stuck out which forced open that gap.

Those hands pushed apart that thick liquid and the space around it. The person who appeared from the darkness within was Akuto.

"I have to admit, that was a creepy way to appear, but it seems that is the power I have been given."

Akuto stepped down into the lounge. He stared at Bouichirou.

"A-chan!"

Keena tried to run over, but Bouichirou grabbed her shoulder and stopped her.

"Wait, let go of me!"

"It is dangerous."

"A-chan will protect me, so it's okay!"

"No. He is the danger."

Bouichirou wrapped his arm around her to stop her.

Akuto's expression grew grim.

"Are you judging me by my appearance? No, wait. It seems we are a poor match on a more fundamental level."

"Agreed. The word villain is not enough for you. I can only think of you as being evil itself."

"What a coincidence. I can only think of you as being good itself. And that has further strengthened my resolve."

"Your resolve?"

"There are two things I must do. The one that is more important at the moment is this: I will protect her freedom."

Akuto held his hand out toward Keena.

Keena stretched her hand out toward him, but Bouchirou did not allow it.

"That is egoism."

"No, it isn't. Freeing us from this story is an issue that affects everyone in this country."

Akuto took a step forward.

In response, Bouichirou swung his sword with his right arm while

holding Keena in his left.

"Uuh...!"

Akuto let out a short groan. He had moved out of the sword's path, but his left arm had been severed.

"A-chan!" shouted Keena.

"I'm fine," said Akuto with a wave of his right hand. "Tch... I thought I put up a mana shield..."

"This does not function under that principle. Mana cannot slice through the dimension itself. This is known as a Hodgson-style perfect slice."

"I don't understand how that works..."

Akuto held the stump of his severed left arm with his right hand. He then gathered strength in his right hand and jammed it into the stump. This was a frightening sight, but it produced surprisingly little blood. Finally, he began to pull his right hand out. The fingers of that hand were intertwined with the fingers of another hand. This was his left hand. As he continued to pull his right hand away, a left wrist and then left arm appeared from the stump. His right hand dragged a new left arm out of the stump.

"You monster. That is disgusting," said Bouichirou as if spitting out the words.

"I agree. I only recently realized I could do this."

Akuto clenched and opened his new left hand to make sure it worked.

"But you cannot avoid every strike. If your torso is hit, it will be fatal."

Bouichirou lifted his sword up in one hand.

"A dimensional slice...hm? I more or less get the idea."

Akuto began moving forward once more.

"You more or less get the idea?" said Bouichirou in a questioning tone as his eyebrows rose in surprise.

However, he swung the sword horizontally toward Akuto's gut instead of asking an actual question.

The slice cutting through space moved horizontally toward Akuto.

And he caught it.

He caught it. He brought his hands in front of his gut with one above the other and brought the palms together. He desperately held them together. Unbelievably, smoke began spewing from between his hands. A great amount of heat was being produced.

"Are you holding space itself together where it was sliced!?"

Even Bouichirou sounded surprised at this.

"It takes a lot of effort, though," said Akuto as sweat poured from his brow.

He began walking toward Bouichirou.

But Bouichirou did not panic.

"It seems your power is greater than I thought it was, but I will stop you!"

Bouichirou quickly fired two attacks. Akuto used his fists to compress and eliminate the approaching slices, but that method was not enough to completely defend against the slices in space itself. Small but sharp slices reached his body in places and he began to bleed a bit from each one.

"Stop me?"

"You will destroy mankind," concluded Bouichirou.

"I have never thought of doing so. Now, let go of Keena."

Akuto held his hand out toward Bouichirou. The look in his eyes was grim.

"I am saying I cannot allow this to be dealt with so hastily!" roared Bouichirou as he began charging at Akuto.

Akuto reflexively jumped back. Bouichirou stopped at the spot Akuto had been in a moment before.

And the location of Bouichirou's hand had changed. When he had begun his charge, his sword had been hanging down toward the ground, but at some point, it had ended up in the location it would be after being swung down.

Immediately afterwards, the front of Akuto's body was sliced open.

"Wah!"

Akuto's eyes opened wide as if to say "impossible" and he felt to his knees. Blood flowed from the wound running from his left shoulder to his right flank.

"This is...a different kind of cut?" groaned Akuto as he touched the wound and stopped the bleeding.

Blood dripped down from the tip of Bouichirou's sword. He had cut Akuto with the sword directly.

"I didn't see the sword."

"If I do not insist on slicing through the dimension, doing this much is not difficult," said Bouichirou.

He had definitely swung down the sword with tremendous speed. The wound on Akuto's chest and the feeling when he was cut proved that much.

Bouichirou faced Akuto while holding the sword up high enough for the tip to be at the height of the boy's throat. He called out to Eiko without turning around.

"Protect her and take her with you."

"Understood."

Eiko grabbed Keena and pulled her away. Keena was now freed from Bouichirou, but she did not try to take a single step.

"Keena!"

Akuto stood up and tried to run over to her, but Bouichirou stopped him with a slight movement of the tip of his sword.

"If you are gone, her fixation with you should disappear along with you."

Bouichirou began moving forward. Akuto moved back in response, but Bouichirou's advance was a bit faster.

And then both the sword and the arm holding it seemed to vanish. Akuto heard repeated explosive noises. The sword was creating sonic booms as it moved faster than the speed of sound.

Spraying blood and ripped clothing scattered in every direction around Akuto and his body was knocked backwards after a slight delay. It was confined to a small location, but the attack had the force of an explosion.

Akuto collapsed to the ground with countless wounds carved into the front of his body. Unlike with the dimensional slices, he could strengthen his body with mana to defend against the direct attacks from the sword to a certain extent. However, these repeated attacks surpassed what he had ever imagined. As his body grew more and more injured, his mind was worn down more and more. Akuto could regenerate his body, but he could not stand up in this situation.

"Understand this: your disappearance will save mankind."

Bouichirou walked up to Akuto and pressed the tip of his sword against him.

"I'm honored you think I'm that important, but I have my own convictions."

Akuto grabbed the sword with his bare hand. He then stood up on trembling legs.

"Your convictions?"

"Nothing can be done if this isn't ended. How can anything change the way things are?"

The look in Akuto's eyes was perfectly serious.

"You want to end this? How short-tempered are you?"

Bouichirou used primarily his wrist to swing the sword. Akuto's hand was knocked from the tip.

"Enough. You will eventually run out of energy and lose your bodily control using mana. You will be unable to defend against my sword and you will die. Standing will only make this more painful. Give up."

With that announcement, Bouichirou swung the sword once more. With the sound of the air being sliced and of a small explosion, Akuto's body was knocked back once more.

"I will end this with the next strike."

Bouichirou almost seemed to glide forward. He moved after Akuto and raised his sword.

Akuto must have lost consciousness because he did not react to Bouichirou's pursuit.

Bouichirou then let out a short breath just before he let loose another high speed strike.

"Wha-!?"

Bouichirou stopped moving. The earth had suddenly begun to shake beneath his feet. No, he was inside the school building, so it was not an earthquake. The entire school building was shaking.

Bouichirou must have sensed what was causing it because he turned toward the staircase leading up to the lounge. At the same moment, a large object shot out toward Bouichirou.

Bouichirou deflected it with his sword.

What fell down next to him was a snail shell large enough to need both hands to reach around. That giant snail shyly stuck its tentacles out of its shell and ran away as if to say it had not meant to anger Bouichirou.

"A demonic beast..." muttered Bouichirou.

"Akuto-sama!"

That voice signaled a tsunami flowing out from the staircase.

It looked just like a dark tsunami. Countless demonic beasts had all poured out of the staircase at once. The various demonic beasts were all

fighting for the lead as they made their way through the entrance. It was less a group of rampaging wild animals and more of a cruel stampede. As those creepy giant creatures approached like a tsunami pushing its way into a small harbor, the lounge was overwhelmed in the blink of an eye.

Bouichirou jumped back, but one of those demonic beasts – it resembled a giant spider – skillfully grabbed Akuto with its front legs and placed him onto its back.

“Ho ho ho ho ho! My work is complete! I, Etou Fujiko, have achieved such wonderful results in the research I carried out for my beloved Akuto-sama! I have discovered a method of having the demonic beasts obey my every word! Although that giant snail I threw in here listens to me for a different reason!”

As Fujiko made that announcement, she was mounted atop an especially large demonic beast. She was wearing a black leather dress with a rather risqué cut. The demonic beast she rode was a giant demon dog with three heads. She looked exactly like the queen of the demon world. Completing her research would not have automatically made her look that way, so she had to have chosen the style herself. It was unclear if that should be seen as showing her determination or her easily carried away personality.

Fujiko brought the Cerberus up to the spider and lifted Akuto up from it. She pulled a potion from a bag attached to the Cerberus’s saddle and had Akuto drink it.

“Uuh...”

Akuto woke up. Having Akuto in her arms must have been ecstasy for Fujiko because she embraced him with a look of so much joy it seemed her nose would start bleeding any second.

"Akuto-sama! I did it! They will all act on any command you give them! Please use this to go on a rampage!"

Akuto grasped the situation and stroked Fujiko's head. Fujiko shed tears of joy and Akuto turned an absentminded look toward her.

"I do not want to tell these demonic beasts to die for me, but there is something I want to do. And I am happy that you put in all this work for me. I will make full use of this help you are giving me."

Akuto climbed down from the Cerberus and raised a hand.

The demonic beasts gave a stir in response. An eerie swirl of mana appeared around Akuto and spread out. The demonic beasts touched by it reacted as if they had been hit by an electric shock.

"Kh... So you are even going to use that abominable power!?" shouted Bouichirou.

He must have sensed the danger because he turned around toward Eiko and Keena. Eiko was still holding Keena while she watched the scene around her with a blank look.

"Take her and flee! I will hold them here!"

Eiko looked up in sudden realization when she heard Bouichirou's voice. She tried to leap away with Keena under her arm, but the demonic beasts moved before she could. They crawled along the walls and filled up the entire lounge.

"I wouldn't stick around even if you asked me to!"

Eiko's spine trembled from a physiological sense of disgust. No one could watch bugs cover their bedroom wall without feeling any kind of emotion. Eiko held Keena under her left arm, drew her short sword with her right hand, and leaped for the broken area of the skylight. However, sticky threads were sprayed toward her from all four directions. She swung her short sword and cut through them, but that made it impossible for her to use flight magic and escape through the hole in the skylight before the demonic beasts covered the hole with their own bodies.

"If we escape, we can redo this later!"

Eiko threw Keena down. Lighter now, Eiko sliced through the body of a centipede with wings that flew toward her. She then made her way through the hole. In the very next instant, the demonic beasts finished covering every inch of the lounge's walls.

"She gave her own safety priority!? That heartless girl!"

Bouichirou's expression was one of disappointment.

Keena fell, but she soon began to float through the air. Turning herself invisible and flying were the only two things she was any good at.

"A-chan!"

Keena tried to fly toward Akuto, but Bouichirou ran toward Akuto to stop her. If he could finish off Akuto before Keena arrived, she would have nowhere left to go.

To stop his advance, a snake demonic beast with several tails leapt toward Bouichirou with its fangs bared.

"Will you sacrifice your subordinates!?"

Bouichirou swung his sword with one hand. The high-speed invisible attack sliced the snake's head to pieces. But even with its head gone, the snake continued on without dying. It had tremendous vitality. So Bouichirou went even further. Without letting up with his attacks, he pulverized the body charging toward him. It was like pressing a soft rod into a quickly rotating cutter.

After the snake had been pulverized down to the tips of its tails, Bouichirou dashed out from the shower of flesh and blood. He must have kept it all away with his high-speed sword attacks because his shapely face and white clothes did not have a single drop of blood on them.

"Haaaah!"

Bouichirou attacked Akuto.

Akuto stood up to the man's charge, but he was unable to do anything against his attack once more.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

Keena and Fujiko both cried out.

Fujiko tried to run over on the Cerberus, but Akuto managed to remain standing despite having been knocked back by Bouichirou's blade. He held his arm out to tell her to say back.

"Stop. You can't defeat him," he warned.

"Do you think you have any chance of winning?" asked Bouichirou.

Akuto nodded.

"I can feel power welling up within me. My determination has grown clear, so the power is gathering."

"So you can win if you can buy enough time? In that case, I will end this quickly."

"It is not an issue of buying time. It is an issue of my will. In the end,

whatever I might have said, I never truly thought this before.”

“Your will? Your will is of no consequence,” said Bouichirou.

However, Akuto stretched his hand upwards as if he had not heard the man at all.

Keena lowered toward that hand. Akuto took her hand and brought her down next to him.

Looking worried for Akuto, Keena brought her hand up to his face. Akuto nodded silently, had Keena move back, and faced Bouichirou.

“Not necessarily. I will bring an end to this story. That is what I have decided.”

“This story? Are you talking about everyone’s faith?”

“Yes. You are using people’s faith. You want to control the gods to accomplish something.”

Bouichirou nodded at that.

“That is the only way to avoid destruction. I know that you will destroy this world.”

“And so it is fine for people to believe in the lie that is their faith in the

gods?" asked Akuto.

Bouichirou gave a thin smile using only his lips.

"People are weak. Cowards and criminals are automatically exterminated and the weak wish to remain in the position of the weak. This is the story mankind desires. And I have obtained power for the sake of those people. If you obediently let yourself be defeated, everything will be resolved nicely."

"A will to become stronger is important, but a will to never forgive the weak is not needed."

"What are you trying to say?" asked Bouichirou.

"Cowards and criminals cannot be judged by anyone. Not even by the gods."

After saying that, Akuto made an announcement in a calm voice.

"I will kill the gods."

In that instant, a swirl of power appeared around Akuto.

It was already late at night. Hiroshi had managed to leave the Iga village. He had left Yuuko with Youzou and made his way to an abandoned area in the name of protecting Korone. After leaving Korone

deactivated in a room of the Hattori house, he had activated his suit and made his way to the sky above the academy.

The sight he saw there utterly shocked him.

"Aniki! What are you trying to do!? Is this what you wanted!?"

The school building had begun to change before Hiroshi's eyes. This change was obviously due to Akuto's power. Demonic beasts that had apparently been lurking on the academy grounds and demonic beasts that had apparently been hiding without anyone knowing of their existence had been drawn to the academy. They were gathered together and covered one portion of the school building. The school building itself seemed to be turning into a living creature. It was being twisted into ugly colors and the surfaces of the trees surrounding it had grown what looked like the shells of living creatures.

It could only be described as the demon king's castle. It was everything people detested given physical form.

"Whatever you're thinking, this will only make everyone try to kill you!" shouted Hiroshi despite there being no one to hear it.

Chapter 4: Akuto's Great Imperial Capital War

After escaping the school building late at night, Teruya Eiko turned back toward it. Her spine trembled at the transformation taking place.

"I can't take part in a battle between monsters," she complained to herself. "Even so, the guys I take an interest in are all completely insane. But that will end here. Only the winner will be able to stay with me."

Eiko pulled out a telepathic communicator and called the Teruya family. It was late at night, but a servant answered right away.

{Lady Eiko, what is it?}

"Father was killed."

{Understood. Can you confirm this?}

The servant remained calm. This was not because he knew Eiko had been the one to kill him. Not panicking over a death was simply the Teruya family way.

"You can confirm the official mission. It's top secret, but I will send you the encrypted code."

Eiko pulled out the symbol of Suhara's high priest and checked the code written on the back. Only the high priest could see the characters.

{An assassination mission. To kill this girl?}

"She is a girl in the magic academy that the demon king cares for. Father was killed by the demon king. I'm at the academy as well. I'll show you what things look like here."

Eiko used the video transmission function of her telepathic communicator to show the academy behind her. This elicited a surprised voice from the servant.

{Now this is a surprise. We need to do something about this, don't we?}

"I have taken over the position of Suhara's high priest. This is a special treatment allowed only for Suhara. This qualifies as a time of war and my father left me the right to take emergency command. And so I will command this war. Contact all related organizations. You can let the press in too. To officially keep the high priest within the Teruya family, I will attack the academy and resolve this situation."

The servant must have grasped the situation from that explanation because he promised to call her back and then ended the telepathic connection.

The servant had of course consented to Eiko's plan. The high priest was elected by the priests. Eiko would never be chosen during a normal vote, but that could change if she showed off what she could do here.

" 'Whatever happens, you just have to win.' This family does have some excellent precepts. That is overflowing with dreams and possibilities."

Eiko laughed quietly and began pondering how to arrange the troops on the academy grounds.

Junko had cried for a very long time. When she saw her red eyes in the mirror she gave a miserable smile and muttered, "I am such an idiot." It was only when a knock came on the sliding door to the bathroom that she realized something was wrong. This was no normal knocking, so Junko's voice sounded strained as she responded.

"What is it?"

"An emergency gathering has been called," replied a ninja.

"For the entire Hattori family?"

"Yes."

Emergency gatherings were only called at times of war. That meant a war was starting. Junko's thoughts immediately turned to Akuto.

"I will be there right away."

Junko roughly washed her face and dried it with a towel. She was embarrassed that her eyes were still red, but there was nothing she could do. As she walked down the hallway, residents of the house were frantically moving about. It was 3 AM yet the house felt like the student

dorm in the morning.

"Where is my father?" she asked a nearby person.

The man must have been in a hurry because he spoke quickly.

"He fought that heretic and managed to drive him away, but seems to regret not finishing him off. He headed for the storehouse to see if he could draw the family's treasured sword to finish this once and for all."

"What?"

Junko was shocked. She had only known that some kind of commotion had begun over her, but it seemed to have developed into something else.

"Do not worry. Even if it costs us our lives, we of the Iga ninja forces will make a bloodbath out of that heretic who deceived you! Just watch!"

The ninja's eyes were glowing brightly. It was not that he was in a hurry. His loyalty to Junko and her family was burning within him. Junko could not help but be confused when she realized this.

—H-how could this happen? What did he do?

Junko walked to the storehouse. Whenever a ninja saw her, he would raise his battle spear or sword and shout "For Lady Junko!", "Defeat the heretic demon king!", or "The time has come to show the power of the Iga

ninja forces!"

—They are completely fired up. Is this all because I was such an idiot?

"Father!"

She cut across the yard and arrived at the storehouse. The door was open, so she called inside.

"Junko," replied Youzou.

He did not tell her to stay out, so she stepped inside. No one would interrupt them there, so it was the perfect place to talk.

"Father, what happened?" she asked.

Youzou held a single sword horizontally in both hands.

"It seems there was a misunderstanding. I am not completely blameless, but it seems he never intended to join the Hattori family."

"That is because I did not tell him. The blame lies with me," said Junko, but Youzou's response was not at all what she had been expecting.

"That does not matter. He has made a terrible decision. He has defied the gods. We can now fight him without worry."

"What are you talking about?"

Youzou explained what happened in the forest to a surprised Junko. This was the first Junko had heard of the Teruya family's assassinations.

"Father!"

"I understand what you wish to say, but that is how society works. It may only be at school, but you have taken on the role of class representative. That should help you somewhat understand. Also, if you wish to change things for the better, you need power. And power rarely looks completely clean."

"...Understood."

Junko understood it in theory. She had no choice but to agree.

Youzou then showed Junko video footage from a telepathic communicator.

"He has holed up in the academy. This is what has become of your school."

Junko was utterly shocked at the demonic castle that had once been her school.

"Then this battle will be..."

"It will be a fight to defeat him. Teruya Eiko has taken command."

"I thought the head of the family took command?"

"Sai Akuto killed Keizou."

"...That cannot be!"

Junko immediately denied the idea because she knew Akuto's personality, but Youzou shook his head.

"He was powerful. I do not know the details, but I do not doubt he could have killed Keizou."

"That is not what I meant. He..."

"Personal feelings are not needed here. There are parts of this I do not like either, but as Suhara followers, we must do this. No matter how much we dislike the Teruya family and no matter how interesting a person Akuto-kun is, we must remember one thing and one thing only: this is a fight to protect our family."

Junko could not say anything in response.

"And if we are to fight, we must rejoice at the strength of our opponent. Akuto-kun was powerful. I doubt I can truly oppose him as I am now. That is why I will draw this."

As Youzou spoke, he indicated the sword he held in his hands.

"That is our family's treasured sword, the Sword of Sohaya," muttered Junko.

The strongly curved long sword was contained within a plain scabbard.

"It is said the Hattori family was given it when we converted to the Suhara faith. But..."

Junko knew what followed the word "but". No one had ever been able to draw it from its scabbard.

"So you will draw it, father?"

"If I do not, I cannot fight him. This long sword amplifies the mana in one's body. It increases the abilities of its user several-fold."

The Sword of Sohaya had been made at the same time as the god. It was rumored to be a tool that tested the limits of what could be done with mana. The religion of each god was said to have a similar magic tool, but most were either hidden or unusable like this long sword.

Youzou tightly gripped the sword. He was trying to remove it from the scabbard. However, it would not budge. It was as if the sword had fused with the scabbard.

"Why is it that you cannot draw it?" asked a sudden voice from the

storehouse's entrance.

Youzou and Junko turned toward the voice.

"Mother."

"Grandmother."

Standing in the entrance was an old woman who was Youzou's mother and Junko's grandmother. She was short and had a gentle look on her face, but she had managed to approach the two of them without making a single noise. She was no normal person.

"I cannot draw it either because I am inexperienced or am not qualified."

"Ho ho ho," laughed the grandmother quietly at Youzou's answer. "There was a time in the past when you could have drawn it. You are a good person, but you are interested only in raising yourself higher. That has narrowed your vision so you cannot see the simple truth."

Despite the biting words, Youzou did not raise his head.

"The...truth."

"Yes. Mana reflects your mental state and the gods are constantly watching our actions, but there are things that cannot be seen simply by looking inside yourself. You cannot draw the blade because you are not

using it for the reason it was created. There is no deep meaning to it." The grandmother snatched the Sword of Sohaya from Youzou. "For one thing, you always want to fight any powerful person you come across and just kill them and kill them and kill them. That really is a bad habit. Are you perhaps mistakenly thinking fighting is your job? Someone like that cannot hold the greatest of all killing knives. I will be giving this to Junko."

She handed the Sword of Sohaya to Junko. Surprised, Junko tried to return it, but her grandmother only said "take it" before continuing to lecture Youzou.

"Another thing, Youzou-san. You let the Teruya girl take command of this battle. You growing stronger here would be nothing more than adorning the Teruya family's generations-long rule with flowers. I understand that we must follow them for our family's sake and for our god's sake, but you are only doing this because you will be able to fight someone so powerful you could die. And even as an adult, you do not realize it."

"I have preparations to take care of," said Youzou before escaping from the lecture that was showing no sign of ending.

The grandmother silently watched him leave, but she turned a charming smile toward Junko once Youzou had left.

"This is the boy I met at the station when you left your luggage behind, right? It seems a lot has happened, but handle this however you like. Youzou will take responsibility."

"But grandmother..."

"Do not worry about it. I believe your original impression of him was accurate."

Junko did not know how to respond to that, but she felt her face reddening.

"R-right."



Junko nodded and stared at the family's treasured Sword of Sohaya. However, she had no idea how to use it.

"I cannot draw this, can I?"

"No. You can trust god or not, but god does not actually understand

human emotions. The same goes for the sword. Facing it so seriously will get you nowhere. You will likely only be able to draw it when doing something Suhara wishes for you to do."

"I-is it really that simple?"

"It is. And once you draw it, you can do whatever you want. Instead of introspection or faith, you must believe in those living people who care about you."

"Grandmother..."

"So whatever you choose, I will not mind."

Junko's grandmother smiled.

"Understood."

Junko nodded and placed the Sword of Sohaya at her waist.

The first to arrive at Constant Magic Academy were the Kouka ninja forces commanded by the Teruya family. While they were ninja, those that were not special forces were nothing more than normal soldiers. They were primarily armed with bayonet equipped rifles and long swords. Five hundred of those were gathered.

In battles using magic, firearms held little meaning, so the more

powerful soldiers tended not to carry guns. The normal soldiers only carried rifles because they had poor magic skills, but the attack troops such as the armored warriors were armed with their own favorite weapons such as long spears, long swords, and battleaxes. One hundred of those more powerful troops were gathered.

This was almost the entirety of the Kouka ninja forces and it was on the scale of a battalion. Teruya Eiko commanded all of them and she was currently giving formation instructions to the company commanders she had gathered.

As she did so, cameras were trained on her. The media had arrived before the knights or the troops from the Hattori family and other groups. She had given them permission to broadcast what was happening. It was late at night, but a special report being broadcast across the imperial capital showed the demon king's castle that had once been a school building.

Naturally, the demon king was being reported as being the common enemy of all mankind. The expectation was that the battle would mostly involve fights against demonic beasts. Unlike with human opponents, they could be broadcast without censorship no matter what happened. The entire empire would certainly be watching on as a form of entertainment.

Eiko's objective of obtaining popularity was going as well as it possibly could. To those who did not know her, she appeared to be a dignified and beautiful girl who was afraid of nothing. And it appeared coincidence was on her side as well. The three members of the Hattori family arrived where the cameras could see them.

When Youzou, Junko, and Yuuko arrived at Eiko's tent, they were the perfect targets for the cameras. Youzou looked quite heroic and both his daughters were beautiful. As a plus, one of those daughters was a famous idol.

Youzou had not expected the cameras. This meant he was aiding Eiko in her attempt at popularity. Even so, he had no choice but to reluctantly obey Eiko here.

Junko and Yuuko did not like it either, but they could not allow themselves to show it on their faces. Junko focused on preserving her perfectly diligent expression, but Yuuko turned pleasantly toward the camera because she was used to this.

Yuuko's condition had recovered from before, but the effects of the demonic beasts had not actually disappeared. Her battle outfit was hiding it, but the black blood vessels sticking out on her neck were only increasing. Even so, she had regained her energy when she heard they would be fighting the demon king. In fact, she was even more energetic than before.

Youzou gave Eiko a formal greeting.

"The Iga forces led by the Hattori family have arrived."

Eiko nodded calmly at Youzou's greeting.

"I wish to use the Hattori family to its fullest now that it is under my command."

Eiko's gaze stopped on Junko's sword. That sword was the sacred treasure of Suhara and the Teruya family had long loathed the fact that they did not possess it. Eiko laughed inwardly. The chance to acquire it may have arrived.

"I will have Junko and Yuuko's company take the lead."

The Hattori family had brought a battalion of 600 troops with them. However, most of them were specialized in ninja work, so they were not suited to a battle on an open battlefield. Taking the lead would be very dangerous. And they could not refuse while the television cameras were watching. Eiko was planning to use this opportunity to wipe out the Hattori family. That was the type of person she was.

Youzou and Junko both realized what Eiko was thinking. Youzou opened his mouth to provide some sort of resistance. He simply needed some reason he could give here. However, he was cut off by a shout from Yuuko.

"Okay! I'll defeat all the demonic beasts on the vanguard! I won't leave any for anyone else!"

No matter how wild Yuuko could be, she had not been the type to say something like that. Youzou and Junko both looked over in surprise. However, they were unable to stop her. When it came to comfort in front of the television cameras, no one could outdo Yuuko. She promised the viewers she would take the vanguard and, with fake tears in her eyes, she announced her determination to hunt down the demonic beasts.

Without being given a chance to back down, the Hattori family was

forced to take part in the strategy meeting.

At around that time, a report arrived that the imperial army's flying aircraft carrier had arrived. It was a mobile fortress that held an entire brigade of 2500 people. It possessed an engine that created energy on its own that allowed it to disseminate mana. Its ability to create an environment in which mana could be used made it the perfect for magic battles.

At that moment, dawn broke. As the light of dawn caused Genkaku to glitter, it held an inexpressible majesty. It was just as large as Constant Magic Academy's school building which had transformed into the demon king's castle. It came to a stop one kilometer away from the school building.

With that, Eiko had 3700 troops under her command. And the knights would be meeting up with her later. The people casually watching the battle on television would never have guessed what an extraordinary event was about to occur.

As he watched the transition from the sky, Hiroshi could not help but be surprised by the arrival of Genkaku and the involvement of Yuuko and the others from the Hattori family. He did not know what Akuto was thinking, but since he knew what had led to all this, he could only laugh at how out of control the situation had grown.

—What am I supposed to do?

He was at a loss, but one thing stood out to him. His suit's visor could

receive all sorts of information. He was of course receiving the television footage being broadcast. The difference in how Yuuko was acting bothered him. He knew both how she acted on television and how she truly acted, so he could sense something ominous about her behavior.

—Is there anything I can do for her? Can I fight that many demonic beasts? Can I fight that gigantic aircraft carrier? No...

But as he thought about how large the situation had grown, he felt an emotion similar to anger directed toward Akuto who had invited it all in.

—I wanted to be as strong as him, but this is wrong. Is he abandoning something for his own selfish desires?

Hiroshi thought.

—Come to think of it, this suit was made for anti-magic combat.

He instructed the suit to display its abilities on the visor and it did so. He carefully read the portion concerning the mana canceller. Its abilities were surprising. It could negate any mana within a few hundred meters of the suit.

—If I use this...I might be able to defeat either one?

Hiroshi glanced over first at the castle filled with demonic beasts and then the aircraft carrier.

—In that case, there is only one thing that I can do and that I must do.

With his mind made up, Hiroshi began his descent. Junko and Yuuko's company had finished taking its position. He landed in the center of that company's formation.

The fully armed ninja initially grew tense at his approach, but they all knew Brave had protected Yuuko. He was also commonly known as Demonic Beast Killer Brave. When they saw who he was, the tension transformed into cheers.

The news crew had also spotted Brave. Hiroshi checked the footage on his visor. Seeing it made him feel a bit awkward.

But it was not the ninja or the news who gave him the greatest welcome; it was Yuuko. She ran right up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You came! That's right! Let's go kill these abominable demonic beasts together!" said Yuuko with a look of joy.

Hiroshi could feel painfully well how oddly she was acting.

"Whether I kill the demonic beasts or not, I will protect you," he said quietly.

The cameras were filming this meeting between the idol Hoshino Yuri and Demonic Beast Killer Brave, but it would not have picked up his voice.

Yuuko replied in an equally quiet voice.

“You have to kill them. We have to kill lots and lots of them. I hate demonic beasts.”

Yuuko gave a carefree smile. This was the perfect expression of an idol, but it gave Hiroshi a dreadful feeling for some reason.

He was using the mana canceller to prevent mana from being used around them, so no one could be listening in on their conversation. Even so, he was still bothered by Junko and the others watching on. Junko was giving them a suspicious look, but Hiroshi could not determine if she had noticed how oddly Yuuko was acting.

Hiroshi was unable to give a response to Yuuko’s request to “kill lots and lots of them”. Luckily, the cameraman approached and he had an excuse to fly up into the air. He waved and told her he would be back once the battle began.

—Once the battle begins? What am I supposed to do then?

Amused by his own words, he laughed at himself. He still could not decide what he should do and yet he had decided to protect Yuuko.

Hiroshi finally realized that his actions affected those around him when he had even a little bit of power. He began to wonder if he was now standing in the same position as Akuto, but quickly shook his head. Akuto was intending to sacrifice everything else for Keena’s sake. And as

proof of that...

—It may have been indirect, but he did this to Yuuko-chan. And yet he ran away, leaving her like this.

With the troops in place, Eiko only needed to give the instructions for the operation. But before she could, someone suddenly called out to her from behind.

"What is this? I don't see how you hope to win with this troop deployment. Oh, are you trying to completely annihilate them? Your troops are not up to that."

Eiko was shocked that someone would say that to her, the commander. With the cameras on her, she could not allow it.

"We are up against unfeeling demonic beasts. Annihilation is the only option. And this operation was put together with the troops' consent..."

Eiko turned around as she spoke, but she stopped in surprise when she saw a man in ordinary clothes instead of a military outfit. Also, everyone related to the media was gone.

"Who are you?"

"I am from the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office. I asked to have the cameras leave temporarily. That way we can discuss some more

dangerous topics. If you know what I mean.”

The man smiled as he spoke in a lighthearted tone.

Eiko let down her guard when she heard where he worked.

“Did you bring the knights with you?”

The Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office was the Cabinet Office’s intelligence agency. It usually had eight members registered, so it was commonly known as CIMO 8. However, the details of the organization were not well known. Eiko only knew that they were Bouichirou’s subordinates. They had almost no influence over the military, but they did hold influence over the knights.

“They were standing guard to keep any normal people out. Plus, that is not our job. We came alone.”

“Then what? Don’t tell me you want to take command.”

“No, no. You need not be so cautious. We simply want the right to act as we please here.”

“Because your leader is inside that castle?”

“Exactly. Oh, and if the military accidentally stabs us in the back, we will not complain. We simply want the right to act as we please here.”

Eiko hesitated to grant him that right, but this operation simply required that the demonic beasts be hunted down. It would not matter if they acted on their own.

"Fine then. If that is what you..."

Eiko trailed off because the man disappeared before she finished speaking.

She had been unsure of her decisions not long before, but with the operation's beginning approaching, she switched over her thought process. Once she saw the media return, she announced the operation name proposed earlier.

"Today at 0700 hours, Operation Battering Ram begins."

"Kill the gods?"

Bouichirou looked surprised at Akuto's decision. He was unable to laugh it off. After all, Akuto's power increased the instant he spoke those words.

"If you do that, it is all over. You will not escape unscathed either. For one thing, humanity is completely reliant on the gods. A portion of our brain has already become a mana controller."

"There are ways of resolving that. This is better than allowing someone to decide on their own what path humanity will take," declared Akuto

without a hint of doubt in his eyes.

"In that case, there is no room for negotiation," said Bouichirou.

He tried to contact Eiko, but there must have been mana interference because he could not get through.

"Have you shielded the entire school building?"

"You can't transfer items or yourself using mana either," replied Akuto.

It was currently two in the morning. Dawn was still a long way off.

"I assume this is meant to prevent me from taking her from the school building, but have you realized that it cuts off your own escape as well?"

"That can't be helped. And I'm here to defeat you, so it's no problem."

"How far does your confidence go? You may have gotten a bit stronger, but I doubt that strength has gone far enough that I cannot handle you with a proper weapon. Mana is really nothing more than tiny machines. Their energy is supplied by the power plants that pump energy directly into the earth. You could call that the system of our world."

"Why do I need to listen to your lecture?"

"Why would someone who uses the power given by the nation and the

gods attempt to destroy those gods? That is what I am asking. And no matter how powerful you might become, there is a limit to your power as long as you use that system.”

Bouichirou put away his sword and raised his hand into the air. Something like a transfer magic circle appeared there. A transfer using mana should have been shielded by the demonic beasts, so this transfer must not have been magical. In other words, it did not come from a mana-using civilization.

Bouichirou pulled a sword from that circle. This sword was as tall as he was. The grip was almost completely hidden behind the giant blade and it had weights and support boosters attached to maintain its balance.

“It isn’t signed, but I do not make a habit of growing attached to weapons.”

Bouichirou lightly swung the sword to test its movement.

The air around it exploded. Despite the size of the sword, he could swing the sword at supersonic speeds.

Even Akuto would be easily dealt with if he was struck by that.

“Now then.”

Bouichirou held the sword out horizontally.

He approached.

Tension ran through Akuto's expression.

With no mercy or hesitation, Bouichirou attacked with the large sword.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

Keena and Fujiko both cried out.

But their cries were drowned out by the sonic boom and the clashing of metal against metal.

Akuto was slammed against the wall. The demonic beasts making up the wall cushioned the impact, but smoke rose from the burnt flesh of a wound cutting horizontally across his gut and the arms he had crossed in front of himself. Anyone could see how dreadful that attack had been.

"A-chan!"

Keena tried to run over, but Fujiko grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"You mustn't."

"But...!"

Keena resisted with tears in her eyes, but Fujiko only shook her head.

"If you go, Akuto-sama will stay here and resist. If he cannot stand up to this opponent, the best strategy is to give in and run away. We need to take him with us and flee."

As Fujiko spoke, she took action. She controlled the demonic beasts creating the walls to carry Akuto with their arms that seemed to grow from the walls. Once he had been placed on the Cerberus's back along with Keena, she had the Cerberus run for the staircase leading from the lounge.

"But what will running do? A-chan is..." began Keena.

Fujiko grimaced in annoyance and replied, "Honestly. Both you and Akuto-sama need to be more cunning. If we run away, Akuto-sama will have time to recover. And did you forget that he has a weapon?"

"A weapon?"

"Peterhausen. He is waiting for Akuto-sama underground."

As she spoke, Fujiko looked over her shoulder. And then her face stiffened. The Cerberus was running quite quickly, but Bouichirou was rushing toward them at an even faster speed. He was using his large sword to fly. He seemed to glide through the air as he approached.

"He is going to catch up!" shouted Fujiko in horror.

But just as he was about to reach the Cerberus's tail, another figure appeared before him.

"Uuh!"

Bouichirou's advance was stopped. This figure had walked out from a side passage. It was as if an old man had carelessly walked out into traffic.

And the person who had walked out really was an old man.

However, something in his step made it clear he had intentionally cut off Bouichirou.

"This has become quite serious," said the headmaster.

He had long white hair and a long white beard. He was so old that his appearance was not all that different from an ancient tree. And he spoke in a casual tone of voice as he looked toward Bouichirou.

"Old man... Are you trying to get in my way?"

Bouichirou stepped directly in front of the headmaster.

"That is precisely what I am trying to do. I just happened to be

reminded of what happened 100 years ago," said the headmaster as if simply chatting. But then he turned toward Fujiko and the others. "Go on. I will handle things here."

"But!"

Fujiko was confused. The headmaster was as old as he looked. She doubted he could do anything against Bouichirou. And the headmaster seemed to grasp her doubts from her expression.

"No, no. There is no need to worry. I will handle this somehow or other." He waved his hand to tell Fujiko to go. "I intend to live for a few more centuries, so I am always storing up energy for that purpose."

With that announcement, a change came over the headmaster's body.

It was almost a complete transformation. It began with his arms. The muscles swelled up in an instant and they grew five times as thick. This massive swelling then moved to his shoulders, chest, and the rest of his muscles.

"H-headmaster..."

Fujiko was speechless.

Standing before her was a large man with an impressive physique who had the face of an old man.



"The trick to a long life is to always conserve energy," said the headmaster as he gathered a bit of strength in his body.

The pressure of his muscles caused his already stretched clothes to burst apart on his upper body.

"Now. Does this remind you of 100 years ago? Although who is an enemy and who is an ally has changed somewhat since then."

The headmaster turned back toward Bouichirou.

Bouichirou's expression was twisted in displeasure.

"Are you saying you have switched sides from 100 years ago?"

"Precisely. Flexibly switching sides based on the current age is another trick to long life."

"In that case, I will not hold back."

Bouichirou lifted up his large sword.

"You never change. And that is why you do not seem to be able to age," said the headmaster with loud laughter.

Fujiko headed underground.

"I think we can safely leave that to the headmaster."

"I wonder if he ate a lot of rice."

Fujiko and Keena were surprised by the headmaster's transformation, but he certainly seemed reliable. They used the time he had bought for them to head underground.

But when they reached the entrance to the underground palace, they did not find Peterhausen waiting for them. It was Lily Shiraishi, the student council president. Her stylish hat was pushed deeply over her eyes as she crossed her arms and looked up at the Cerberus.

"What do you think you're doing to our school?"

Lily's voice was brutal yet somehow amused.

That voice awoke Akuto.

"I didn't want to cause any problems for the school. I plan to leave right away."

"Leave?"

Lily pulled up a mana screen and placed it in front of Akuto's eyes. It displayed the broadcast from outside. An army was deployed and the aircraft carrier Genkaku was floating nearby.

"This is the situation outside. I'd say there are about four thousand troops," explained Lily.

Akuto frowned slightly.

"This is bad. There will probably be injuries on the other side. With only a thousand, I could have kept them unharmed."

"You know..." Lily was shocked. She kept her arms crossed as Akuto climbed down from the Cerberus. "I have been monitoring things ever since Teruya Keizou caused that commotion, so I know the situation. The headmaster has also explained the situation to me. I have been waiting to see what you would do."

Hearing that, Akuto nodded and calmly replied.

"What will you be doing, president? I do not want to cause any problems for you."

"I can decide what to do on my own. And I know exactly what that is. I will bring formal charges against Teruya Eiko. After that, I do not know. Then again, doing that will require fighting in a war against four thousand soldiers. Ha ha ha ha."

Lily laughed happily.

"What military force do you have?" asked Fujiko.

Lily nodded and answered, "The student council. The three officers will be coming, so that's three people."

"That is all?"

"You should be surprised that I need that many," said Lily in annoyance. She then motioned for Akuto to enter the palace. "That dragon is waiting. But let me tell you one thing: the two of us do not see eye to eye on this. If you plan to destroy the entire current system, I will stop you."

"Understood."

Akuto walked by Lily and entered the palace.

"A-chan!" shouted Keena worriedly.

Akuto looked over his shoulder.

"Don't worry. Wait here where it's safe. I will be back before long," he said before continuing on.

The black dragon was lying down in the depths of the underground palace. When he saw Akuto, he let out a great voice filled with 100 years' worth of emotions.

"I have been waiting! I have been waiting for this moment, master!"

"I wasn't trying to keep you waiting."

"Yet I was waiting! Now, master, it is time to regain your true power! Let us soar into the sky together and exterminate our enemies!"

“Understood. I have made up my mind now. And that determination has drawn out my power.”

Akuto circled around to Peterhausen’s side. The dragon had a saddle on his back. As Akuto tapped on that saddle, he made an announcement.

“Let me announce it once more: I will kill the gods.”

And in that instant, Akuto became the demon king.

Peterhausen’s cry of joy echoed sonorously through the underground area. The vibration caused the entire school building to shake.

“Let us go, master! When we fight together, no one can stop us!”

Peterhausen looked up to the ceiling and opened his jaws. A steel stake created within his body was fired from his mouth. That stake rotated at high speed and was carved into a spiral. It broke through the thick bedrock of the ceiling and caused a tremendous noise as it created a straight path to the surface.

The soldiers waiting on the surface exchanged glances as they wondered what was causing the roar coming from underground. But in the next instant, a giant stake appeared from below and shot earth and sand into the air. They cried out in surprise.

Even after breaking through the bedrock, the rotating stake kept its momentum and flew high into the sky. It then began to fall toward the ranks of troops.

"Get out of its way!" shouted someone.

The soldiers at the point it was falling at scattered in every direction. With a great roar, the stake crashed into the ground. A cloud of dust rose up and robbed the surrounding soldiers of their sight.

Every company commander was forced to raise their voice to prevent confusion.

"Return to your positions! Do not falter! Our enemies are nothing more than demonic beasts!"

But the shouts of the company commanders suddenly lost all momentum when those commanders themselves were left speechless.

Something with giant black wings flew up from the hole the stake had shot from.

Its shadow covered the soldiers and began freezing their hearts.

A legendary dragon had appeared before their eyes.

To them, this was the same as fear itself taking physical form.

A dark man riding a black dragon. Everyone who saw it began trembling and muttered the following words.

"It's the demon king... The demon king is here..."

Afterword

Thank you as usual. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. Lately, I have been doing nothing but watch sports such as baseball and F1. And of course, I go the unhealthy route and watch it on TV. I think you should all play outside even during the winter. Come to think of it, I was once stranded in a graveyard only a few dozen meters from my house thanks to the snow. If I had died, I would have already been in my grave. Playing outside despite that kind of thing is just what men do.

Here is the fourth volume. Thanks to all of the readers, this is the series' first two-parter. This is also the very first one I have ever written. I am currently vigorously writing the next part. Whether this is your first novel in the series or you are back for more, please continue on with the next volume.

I apologize to those who are reading this at a later date, but as of December 2008, the manga version is serialized in Akita Shoten's Champion RED. It is being written by Itou Souichi-san himself. It is heading into some original events, so check it out even if you have already read the novels.

As for the plans other than the manga that I mentioned last volume, that is a CD drama that will be coming out. It should be released early next year.

The lead roles are played by Ono Daisuke-san and Nakahara Mai-san. The earliest place for new information such as the rest of the cast should be the website (<http://www.hobbyjapan.co.jp/hjbunko/>), so make sure to

check there. I am waiting expectantly, too.

Now then, time for some pointless talk. I bought some cordless headphones recently and the right side produced only static. I went to the store to exchange it. The clerk said it was fine, but when I got home, it was still nothing but static. It was a cordless type, so it seems the problem was in the infrared transmitter. I didn't feel like going back to the store, so I hit the device as hard as I could and that fixed it. What era is this device from...? It still stops working sometimes, but I just have to hit it again to fix it. Then again, I'll probably completely break it one of these days.

Okay, now about the novel.

As usual, there is no need for explanation, but I think this volume would be a lot more interesting if you had read the previous volumes. Characters that appeared in Volume 2 but not Volume 3 show up too, so if you check back, I hope you will say something like "Oh, that's right. That character was here." Anyway, I hope anyone who started with this volume will pick up the previous ones as well. Having self contained stories is nice, but as the author, I feel a continuing series can be fun too. One of the joys of writing a series is to give a major role to a character that seemed to be very minor at first.

And I was only able to continue writing this thanks to all of your support, so I truly thank you.

I thank my illustrator, Itou Souichi-san. I am reading the manga every month. I am paying special attention to how it changes and evolves each chapter. It delights me that I will be able to read another chapter before long.

I thank my editor, Ohashi-san. Thank you even more than usual this time. I must cause you so much trouble every time. And I may have reached an age where I can't pass it off as being inexperienced, but I believe I will still be able to improve my writing speed from now on. I personally feel very strongly that you should be able to give an answer when asked about your dreams for the future even after you pass thirty or forty. But that is also no excuse for leaving your dreams unfinished.

I also thank everyone else related to this novel. You have helped me out in so many ways.

Now then. We may have arrived at something like a climax, but this will continue well past the fifth volume. Do not worry. Let's enjoy this together for a while longer!



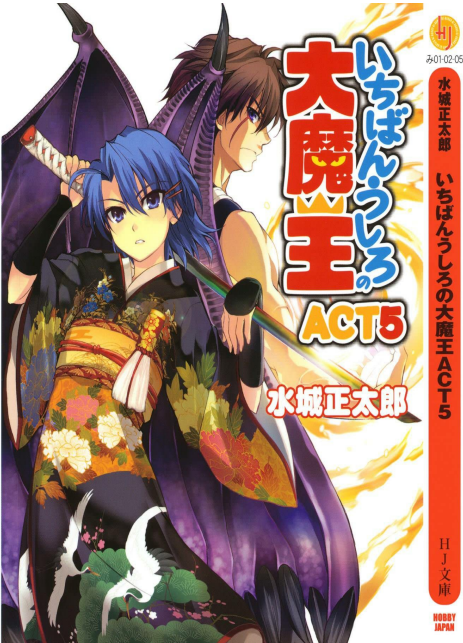
水城正太郎 みずきしょうたろう

『魔空タフボイド』シリーズ（富士見ミステリー文庫）、『せんすいかん』シリーズ（HJ文庫）、『おにーデータ』を経て、現在ライター兼監（A・T・E・A・M）主催。なぜか戦場で足音をひねって転ぶという行為を二回連続でしてしまいました。この事から足音、足音、心算です。明らかに足の筋力が衰えていたのですが、認めるのは難しいので、魔空に足音をつかまれたと言います。これは祝いです！

伊藤宗一 いとうそういち

兵庫県在住のイラストレーター兼漫画家。一般向けから成年向けまで幅広く活動中。好物は、熱血・悪役・萌え・格闘・エロ・萌。<愛>。ドラマCD「いちばんしろの大魔王 VOL.1」の収録に行っていました。すごく良い出来なので、今から絵品箱を楽しみにしています！書き下ろし裏ジャケットの、けーなばんつは頑張りました。お楽しみに！

カバーイラスト／伊藤宗一 装丁／西村 大



9784894258303



1920193006193

ISBN978-4-89425-830-3

C0193 ¥619E

定価：[本体619円]+税



ついに「神殺し」を決意した阿九斗は
騎竜ピーターハウゼンに跨りコンスタン
魔術学院の空に舞った。
物語の鍵を握るけーな、阿九斗と敵
対することになってしまった駒子、阿
九斗に忠誠を誓う不二子、勇者ブレ
イブ、それぞれの運命は？
戦場と化した学院を舞台に様々な思
いや陰謀が交錯する！
庄巻の魔王覚醒編後編。

HOBBY JAPAN

水城正太郎 作品

せんすいかん その1

せんすいかん その2

せんすいかん その3

せんすいかん まとめ

いちばんしろの大魔王

いちばんしろの大魔王ACT2

いちばんしろの大魔王ACT3

いちばんしろの大魔王ACT4

いちばんしろの大魔王ACT5

いちばんうしろ
大魔王
ACT5





「どうしてこんなことになったの？」
けーなは聞いた。

「それは難しい問いよ。本当に難しいわ」



登場人物紹介

さいあくとう
紗伊阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると予言された「善良な」主人公。膨大な魔力を有するが融通が利かない。

そが
曾我けーな

落ちこぼれな天然少女。阿九斗に懐いている。物語の鍵を握る人物？

やまと ほういちろう
大和望一郎

内閣魔術情報調査室のトップ。何故か100年前から姿が変わっていない。神に対する立場の違いから阿九斗と対立する。

えとうふじこ
江藤不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師にして薬物使い。阿九斗たちの先輩で女子寮長を勤める。



はっとりじゅんこ
服部 紬子

阿九斗のことが気になる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘。



しらいし
リライ白石

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。阿九斗と魔王の件に関して独自路線を歩む。



がくいんちよう
学院長

コンスタン魔術学院の学院長。謎多き老人。魔王が起こした前大戦の経験者。



みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメーカー。伝説の勇者という顔も持つ。



ピーター・ハウゼン

前代の魔王に仕えた全長15メートルの黒竜。阿九斗を主と認め、その騎竜となる。



ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ボシエットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。

Prologue

From his own perspective, Yamato Bouichirou had already lived for hundreds of years. He would appear and disappear within many different eras, but he experienced disappointment in every one of them.

Those disappointments had made him stronger, but they had also made him stubborn. This was caused by his own inability to resolve the contradiction that existed at the base of his heart. No matter how many years or centuries he spent, he could not resolve that contradiction.

Once, far in the future from the era Akuto and the others live in, Bouichirou had worked in a university research laboratory and had been taught information integration science there. This was before he became a time traveler, so it was the very first era of his life.

"If a certain race has inferior intelligence, it is proper that the superior race guides them."

Those words had been spoken by Sudou Rimu, Bouichirou's guidance teacher.

"You can't mean that!"

Bouichirou's disgust reflexively came to the surface. Racial discrimination was a detestable practice of the past. The system of slavery which had caused so much suffering for so long had certainly been based in the reasoning that those races which had achieved civilization were superior to those which had not. It was a disgusting way

of thinking.

But Rimu shook her head with an expression saying that she had predicted his reaction. A hint of disappointment was visible in her eyes. Bouichirou's shoulder's drooped when he saw that expression.

"What kind of cruelty is this?"

While in the research laboratory, Rimu would act as his guidance teacher rather than his lover. And to ensure Bouichirou kept that in mind, she would occasionally ask him cruel questions.

"No. It is not all that cruel."

As she spoke, Rimu let out an obvious sigh. She was a genius in the field of information integration science and her appearance was without fault. But she held such faith in reason that she did not even attempt to hide her scorn for those who took actions based on emotion. That was her one obvious flaw.

"So even you give that response. But think about it. Those words are absolutely correct in and of themselves," said Rimu in admonition.

"I see," said Bouichirou with a nod. "From a scholarly perspective, I suppose so."

"But when you try to apply it to reality, you suddenly cannot accept it. If an intelligence greater than mankind did exist, who would accept that?"

"Why are you bringing this up?" replied Bouichirou because he could not grasp her intention.

Rimu replied with a much more serious expression than he had expected.

"Because mankind will be destroyed."

"Sigh. I regret the fact that I know you too well to think you would be joking," said Bouichirou while doing the best he could to not grow too serious.

However, Rimu's serious expression remained. This terrified Bouichirou even more.

"Destroyed? Are you speaking figuratively? Or.."

"I mean it literally," declared Rimu.

Bouichirou looked around the laboratory. No one was around to hear them speak. Rimu had clearly chosen this moment.

"Is this a topic you cannot allow to get out?" asked Bouichirou with a gulp.

Rimu nodded as if to say, "So you're finally catching on."

"Yes, of course. Only you would think I was sane if I said this. If we do not reach the final battle, mankind will be annihilated by a certain individual."

"That is complete nonsense," replied Bouichirou reflexively, but he then spoke back to Rimu to calm himself down. "You are the one that created the foundational principles for the weapon to defeat the demon king. Thanks to that, we can immediately eliminate any demon king that appears from now on. So why will mankind be annihilated if we do not reach the final battle?"

"The theology supporting my research was fundamentally flawed. That is why a new demon king is born no matter how many times the demon king is defeated."

"Flawed?"

"Yes. The gods already have a will of their own. We have misread the situation. And have done so for hundreds of years."

"So are you saying the gods will destroy mankind...? No, you said it would be a certain individual..."

"Yes. It will not be the mechanized gods that are no more than a system created by mankind. There may be a real god. The gods of antiquity. The being called god when mankind first created religion. You could call it the God of the Old Planet."

Rimu's words sent Bouichirou into an indescribable state of confusion. She was saying a real god might exist. And she was saying it would destroy mankind.

Bouichirou was left completely speechless, so Rimu gave a resigned smile.

"Is that really your reaction? But... <Our mechanized gods used intelligence several levels above our own with reasoning we cannot understand to determine that most of mankind must die to save mankind.> That is my thought."

Bouichirou was not someone who would not understand the situation after hearing that much. He was filled with fear when he thought about what would happen if that was true.

"So that is why you asked that first question!"

"Yes. Logically correct statements can lead to emotional backlash. 'War can be justified.' 'White people are cowards.' Mankind has definitely been given an abundant lifestyle to stop saying that sort of thing. But what if that is not what mankind was born to do?"

"Are you saying humans were born to discriminate and slaughter each other?"

"Perhaps. The god that created mankind is trying to destroy mankind and the mechanized gods we have created are trying to save mankind from that."

Rimu's worldview caused Bouichirou to hold his head in his hands. He could not decide whether she was right or not.

"D-do you have any proof?" he asked.

It would be a lot better if Rimu were simply insane. But Rimu calmly shook her head.

"As is often the case in information integration science, I can only speak philosophically. However, the reason certain types of animals do not hesitate to kill other animals is because they are as identical to their surroundings as a drop of water in a pool of water. The only creatures that resist becoming one with nature in that way are those with great intelligence such as us. You could say I believe intelligence is the same as being in opposition to becoming one with nature like that. However, the gods we created are the same as nature while still possessing great intelligence."

"Then this idea of mankind being destroyed...?"

"Yes. I heard about it directly from the gods. I spoke with a shrine maiden of Suhara. No one had asked the right questions, so the answer had never been arrived at before. That is how it was hidden for hundreds of years. The reason a demon king is born and the reason we are driven to war have both been kept hidden for so long."

"I cannot bring myself to believe this. It is possible you are being deceived. Why would mankind's numbers need to be lowered in order to save it? It makes no sense."

Rimu's shoulders drooped in resignation when she heard Bouichirou's opinion.

"This is where you have no taste at all. But there is no time, so think about it on your own. However, I do have proof that the God of the Old Planet exists. We constantly use mana to transfer ourselves through space, but why can we not pass through time? We cannot break the barrier of time with technology that uses mana. In other words, we cannot interfere with the dimension itself. And yet we can transfer through space. That is a contradiction. The reason for this is the Law of Identity. We cannot help but think that we are ourselves. That is the source of our intelligence as living beings. And that was created by the God of the Old Planet," said Rimu. She shook her head in disappointment when she saw Bouichirou clearly still did not understand. "You do not need to believe me. I will leave you a chance to research. Once you complete that, you may come to understand what I mean." Rimu displayed a mana gauge and showed it to Bouichirou. "This is the inherent vibration of my mana. If you use this, you can overcome the barrier of time."

"What? That's-..."

Bouichirou swallowed the word "ridiculous", but he still began wondering if Rimu truly was insane. Just as Rimu herself had said, the ability to travel through time had been researched for a long time but had produced nothing but failures.

"You will see once you try it. It will work because I am the Law of Identity."

Rimu smiled gently as she spoke.

Bouichirou could not come up with anything to say in response. He simply said, "I will research it."

"You must not publicly announce anything you heard here. The ability to travel through time must remain a secret until it is complete. I will come to see your results periodically." Rimu began to leave the lab but turned around at the last second. "What do you think would happen to me if I publicly announced this?"

She was still smiling, but she looked somehow sad.

Bouichirou understood the meaning of that expression. Rimu would be deemed insane. No one would believe what she said and she would certainly be imprisoned if she took action to carry out this dream of hers.

Bouichirou felt Rimu's smile came from despair. And he could only think that despair came from his reaction. Rimu desired a comrade who thought the same as she did. And he had been unable to think that way until receiving her explanation. Most likely, he was no different from the majority of people.

"W-wait..."

Bouichirou tried to stop her, but Rimu left without replying.

Bouichirou never saw Rimu again. She had said she would periodically come by to see his results, but she had taken action to support the

demon king shortly after leaving.

Bouichirou had been unable to heal her despair. He had immersed himself in his research as if to ensure he still had that small connection to her. He ultimately developed technology to control time and space, but he realized he would never have a chance to save Rimu when he learned he could not return to a time he had already existed in once. On top of that, the instant he had used the technology he developed had been the exact instant of mankind's destruction.

Whenever Bouichirou closed his eyes, he saw that unforgettable scene in the back of his mind.

A mysterious eddy rose up in the dark red sky. A giant and ominous existence that defied description existed within that eddy. The tens of thousands of troops in the demon king's army drew a spiral around that eddy. The transformed demon king stood at the front of that army. And next to him was Rimu.

This apocalyptic and majestic scene seemed to split Bouichirou's body between the puny mental images of having betrayed his lover's trust and being betrayed by his lover. If possible, he had wanted to take his own life. However, Bouichirou had understood that he would become the last of mankind. During his research, he had become certain that the God of the Old Planet intended to destroy mankind.

Bouichirou needed to flee. He became mankind's lone time traveler and was the only one who could change the situation.

And afterwards, Bouichirou remained mankind's lone time traveler and

he experienced despair for a long, long time.

Chapter 1: Chaos from the Beginning

A military force of 3700 surrounded the demonic castle that had once been Constant Magic Academy. The flying aircraft carrier Genkaku was also present. Even with the great numbers of demonic beasts enveloping the school building itself, they should have been able to take control of the situation with little resistance. However, the demon king Sai Akuto's presence changed that.

Teruya Eiko looked out over the school building and schoolyard from the tent she was commanding from. The schoolyard was covered by the 600 Iga ninja commanded by Hattori Junko and the 1200-man regiment of imperial army infantry. This gave her a total of 1800 troops there. The plan was for them to hunt the demonic beasts surrounding the school building and create an opening to charge through.

But Eiko's plan quickly failed. A metal stake carved with a spiral was fired from underground, creating a hole. The infantry were just about ready to flee when they saw Akuto and the black dragon Peterhausen fly up out of that hole.

"Young lady, what are your instructions!?"

The regiment commander's voice reached Eiko through her telepathic communicator.

"Do not call me young lady! I am the head of the family! Instructions? What else are you to do besides intercept the demon king!?" Eiko shouted back into the telepathic communicator.

But then she felt a presence behind her and turned around.

She had been standing alone in front of the map in the command tent, but a man in a suit had appeared at some point.

Eiko clicked her tongue. He was the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office agent who had been loitering around the tent since the beginning of Operation Battering Ram. And he was one of CIMO 8 who were under Yamato Bouichirou's direct control.

And of all things, he spoke into the telepathic communicator.

"The demon king is a more lenient man than he looks. He naively refuses to attack those who flee and refuses to actively try to kill. Keep your distance and fight so as to provoke him."

"...Wha-!?"

Eiko was dumbfounded. She ended the telepathic connection and immediately turned around. She turned the characteristic intimidating glare of the Teruya family toward the man, but he remained composed.

He looked to be in his thirties. He gave a flippant impression yet he had no distinguishing visual characteristics. One would easily believe he was a salaryman. There was no hiding his well-proportioned build, but the suit he wore hid just how much muscle he had. Every member of CIMO 8 was supposedly an expert in magical combat, but he did not look it.

"You told me I could do this however I wanted!" shouted Eiko angrily.

The man laughed in response.

"My apologies. I merely thought I would provide some help with the information I had gathered. Specifically, I have gathered information on the demon king's personality. I thought you might want to tailor your commands in accordance with that information."

Eiko was at a loss for words. She glanced over at the state of the battle. It appeared the demon king and the black dragon were having a bit of difficulty handling the infantry's more passive strategy. After he would easily blow away a few of the soldiers on the ground, he would spend an even longer time circling around in the air above.

"...I will take it into consideration. What is your name?"

In response, the man made the V-sign with both hands. Eiko's eyebrows rose at that ridiculous gesture.

"Damn you! Are you mocking me!?"

"2V. That is my codename. Nice to meet you, beautiful. Ha ha."

Once Eiko's anger had receded once more, 2V began moving the units on the map that indicated the different military forces.

"Your objective is the annihilation of the demonic beasts and the

capture or death of the demon king, correct? However, the situation has changed."

"I-I intended to have the infantry handle things individually to buy enough time to send in the aircraft carrier," said Eiko, but 2V continued speaking as if ignoring her.

"An attack with the aircraft carrier would greatly damage the academy. This is being broadcast to the entire country and we cannot allow public opinion of the military to drop. It would be best to have your soldiers hunt down the demon king. Am I wrong?"

"I-I know that!"

"I apologize in advance, but the arrangement of your troops shows several bad habits of a novice commander. Have you forgotten that magical combat spreads out in all three dimensions? That black dragon is flying. The infantry provoking him are walking. The troops that can oppose him are the airborne battalion carried within the aircraft carrier. You were planning to have them rush into the school if it came down to it, weren't you? That is not how magical combat works. Use your unit that can fly to three-dimensionally handle your flying enemy."

Eiko could only remain silent when faced with this lecture. 2V waved his hands to tell her to calm down.

"Do not worry. You have command. I am merely supplying information. For example, it seems there is a device within the school that is controlling the demonic beasts. You will find victory much easier if you make destroying that your objective. If you destroy it, control of the

demonic beasts will be lost when the demon king is far enough," said 2V confidently.

Eiko was skeptical. Official military intelligence was not aware of this demonic beast controller. But 2V must have read that skepticism on her face because he spoke as if to preemptively answer her question.

"This is information we have gathered on our own. We are an intelligence office, after all. And no offense to military intelligence, but we are more skilled than your average intelligence agency."

"Can I trust you?" asked Eiko.

"Of course," replied 2V with a smile.

"You say there is a demonic beast controller?"

"Yes. Now, how about we change the strategy to one intended to destroy it?"

2V stretched a hand out toward the map, but Eiko grabbed that hand.

"I am the one who decides on the strategy. You just need to give me what information you have. And you are going to take whatever actions you want, right? Then do so."

"As you wish," said 2V while drawing his head back in an exaggerated gesture of fear.

"A controller?" asked Lily Shiraishi, the short student council president who wore a stylish hat.

Standing before her was a three-headed Cerberus demonic beast ridden by Etou Fujiko and Soga Keena.

"That is correct. I call it the altar."

Fujiko's long hair fluttered as she turned around. Instead of her school uniform, she wore an extreme bondage-style outfit. It seemed to be her image of what one accompanying the demon king should wear. However, she was beautiful enough to pull off that wicked woman look.

"That outfit is against school rules. And on top of that, you created a demonic beast controller at school? Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

There was a world of difference between violating the dress code and controlling demonic beasts, but that short girl with not much of a figure seemed to view them as equal crimes. Lily stared back at Fujiko with a hostile look in her eyes.



Fujiko laughed.

“Ho ho ho. Of course not! The altar is for Akuto-sama. Akuto-sama is much more just and powerful than the school. You could not put up enough resistance to even call it a fight.”

The look in Lily's eyes changed to a murderous one.

"Hm? If I get a little carried away, I might take you out along with him."

"C'mon, don't fight. The headmaster is doing his best, remember?"
warned Keena.

"I did not think I would hear that from you."

Fujiko had been about to make some reply, but Keena's comment must have taken the poison out of her mood. The same seemed to have happened to Lily.

"We can leave the details until later. For now, where is this altar?"

Fujiko answered Lily's question by pointing forward.

The three of them were headed toward the demon king's palace located in the deepest depths of Constant Magic Academy. They continued even farther in until they reached the place where the demonic beasts had been sealed.

"The demonic beasts are controlled using Akuto-sama's unique mana waves, but they go on a rampage when he is too far away or his mind is not in a stable state. That is why I created a device that outputs stable mana waves."

The passageway opened up into a small room. Fujiko climbed down

from the Cerberus and pointed to the center of the room. A black magic altar decorated with skulls and dragons was placed there. It was about the perfect size for a single human to stand in front of it and perform a ritual. It was a venomous-looking object with a primarily red and black coloration.

"That's some taste you've got there," said Lily with a grimace, but Fujiko did not mind.

"Thank you. The mechanism is actually quite simple, but I put a lot of effort into its appearance."

"Simple, hm? I suppose it is the jar-shaped thing in the center that's actually emitting the waves. But I thought it was impossible for a human's unique mana waves to be reproduced by anything but that person's own body."

That question brought an ecstatic look to Fujiko's face.

"It was not easy cultivating a portion of Akuto-sama's body until it would produce those waves."

"Eh? From what I heard, you didn't have enough time to cultivate anything from the time you decided to make this altar to the time you completed it."

Lily looked surprised, but for some reason, Fujiko embarrassedly brought a hand to her cheek and gave no answer.

"A-anyway, if you do not protect this, your loss is unavoidable," said Lily after clearing her throat.

"Yes. I must protect this altar with my life."

Fujiko spread her arms and opened a mana screen that displayed a map of the area around the school.

"Just protect it? That isn't going to cut it," said Lily.

Fujiko placed her hands on her hips and gave a fearless smile.

"Akuto-sama said he would kill the gods. It is only natural that I obey him. And I will not merely be protecting it. Fortunately, this is being broadcast nationwide. If the military is completely decimated by the demonic beasts here, it will give courage to the black magicians across the country!"

"You sure are optimistic. And in that case, I am your enemy."

"My enemy? I thought protecting the school was the student council president's job."

"Are you an idiot? I will not be fighting as the demon king's ally. I came with you to see what you were doing," said Lily angrily.

"In that case, you need not worry. I will do nothing to get in your way, president. And I believe we have a common enemy at the moment."

"Teruya Eiko, you mean? I know what she did. The surveillance cameras just barely caught it. I have proof, but she's probably planning on eliminating all of us."

"Yes, but I have an idea as to how to fight her. If you intend to head out and fight that army, feel free."

"Are you saying you have a plan?" asked Lily since Fujiko was acting so confidently.

"Of course I do. The demonic beasts are under my command. Their teamwork is perfect. And I know exactly how a coward like Teruya Eiko thinks."

"Is that because you're a coward, too?" asked Lily sarcastically, but Fujiko nodded with a huge smile on her face.

"To a black magician, being called cowardly or a user of makeshift methods is the greatest compliment! Teruya Eiko will send her forces in bit by bit out of fear that we will self destruct."

Lily shrugged in annoyance, but then asked a question because Fujiko had touched on the issue of strategy.

"Self destruct?"

"If you do not count the demonic beasts, we are no more than a few

students. If the entire enemy force charged in at once, we could destroy the school building with them all inside. She will fear that first and foremost."

"I see."

"And so she will only send her forces in bit by bit. That provides us with plenty of openings to take advantage of."

Fujiko looked like she was about to begin laughing loudly, but Lily cut her off with a question.

"But that's only if Teruya Eiko is in command, right?"

"Eh? Of course she will be in command. Does she look like the type that would hand command over to someone else?"

"No, but I've been investigating CIMO 8 and I've learned that someone with the codename 2V is with her."

This time, Fujiko asked a question because Lily's tone hinted at some further meaning to her comment.

"2V?"

"He's a specialist in controlling automata. And it seems he's an excellent strategist."

"How is that a problem?"

"If you're that confident, I guess that's fine. But I doubt he is thinking the same thing Teruya Eiko is. If he has some other purpose here, the situation may not progress as you think it will."

Lily's tone was strong, but Fujiko did not seem to be taking her seriously.

"Thank you very much. I will take that into consideration."

"Is that all? Well, do as you wish."

Lily moved away from the altar and began to leave the room.

When Keena saw that, she spoke to Lily.

"You're leaving?"

"The headmaster bought this time for us. I am going to use it in the most effective way I can," replied Lily without turning around.

Several blows had already been exchanged in the confrontation between headmaster in question and Yamato Bouichirou. Bouichirou was holding the giant sword that had blown away even Akuto. The reason he had been forced to use even that sword several times was because the headmaster was giving him no opening.

The headmaster's upper body was bare, but his muscles were constantly undulating without a moment of negligence. His arms were gently rotating around each other in front of his body.

Anyone who knew the headmaster would have found this view of him unbelievable. He had been an old man who looked like a dried-up old tree, but now his exposed upper body was enveloped in tremendous amounts of muscle. This was the ultimate form of manipulating the body with transformation magic.

"Why are you blocking my way?" asked Bouichirou in a harsh voice.

This portion of the academy's underground passageways had only a single path, so he could not advance without defeating the headmaster.

"I have changed over the past hundred years."

The headmaster laughed with a light, youthful voice.

"Before, I fought alongside you to defeat the demon king," pointed out Bouichirou.

"That was with the previous demon king."

"Then why? Why do you block my path when you know my objective?"

"I have not forgotten your objective. But my way of thinking has

changed over the years. I thought defeating the demon king was the correct path back then.”

“And now you do not? But nothing has changed.”

“That is true. But is that not because we failed to do a good job? We defeated the previous demon king. And yet you are here now. Does that not mean that the future was not changed?”

Bouichirou’s expression said those words had hit him where it hurt.

“B-but I did not know what the Law of Identity was back then!” protested Bouichirou.

Bouichirou vanished in the next instant. He had charged forward with tremendous speed. In an instant, he travelled to a point directly in front of headmaster and stopped there. However, he let momentum carry the sword in his hands such that it stabbed toward the headmaster. The tip of the sword broke the sound barrier and a great bursting noise shook the area.

The headmaster could not avoid this attack. If he did, he would be allowing Bouichirou past. However, he would be blown away if he took the attack head on. This was an attack that had blown away even Akuto.

What the headmaster did was nothing more than making one quick exhalation and increasing the speed of the arms rotating in front of his body.

Those arms moved as if sticking to the center of the blade. The rotation of the headmaster's arms knocked the giant sword off of its path.

"Tch!"

Bouichirou was unable to correct the path of the deflected sword and the tip stabbed deep into the wall. The sword stopped in the wall, but Bouichirou was forced to jump back or else expose his defenseless body to the headmaster.

The two were facing each other from the same distance as before.

There were a few holes in the school wall caused by that sword. The reason they had repeatedly exchanged blows yet the situation had not changed was that this same exchange occurred each time.

The headmaster did not attack Bouichirou, so nothing happened besides the passage of time.

"Are you not attacking me in order to buy time?"

"You may imagine whatever reason you wish. However, the real reason is that this Kakei[1] is most suited to this old body of mine."

"Either way, it prevents either of us from moving. And the situation is growing worse for me. I had not wanted to kill my old friend. I had actually wanted to speak with you, but you leave me no choice. Please do not hold a grudge if I end up killing you." Bouichirou slightly adjusted his grip on the sword. "I will be slicing through the dimension itself. This is

the Hodgson-style perfect slice.”

Bouichirou swung his sword as he spoke and empty space was sliced apart along the path of its tip as if that space was made of gelatin. And that slice shot toward the headmaster at tremendous speed.

Slicing through space itself was a technique that allowed one to cut through anything. That was what Bouichirou had used to cut off Akuto’s arm. The headmaster was of course unable to deflect this with the rotation of his arms.

The dimensional slice touched the headmaster’s body.

However, the headmaster continued to stand with an unconcerned look on his face. The slice passed through him and continued on the other side. Nothing happened to his body.

“What...?”

Bouichirou’s eyebrows rose slightly.

He fired another Hodgson-style perfect slice, but the sliced space passed straight through the headmaster once more.

“How? Is this just an image?”

Bouichirou sliced through space once more and charged forward after it. He swung his sword down along the same path as the slice in space.

The headmaster did not dodge the slice in space yet still deflected the sword with the rotation of his arms.

"How?"

Bouichirou jumped back once more.

"How I did it is a secret. You need little tricks like this if you are going to live as long as I have. Oh, but I suppose you have lived longer than me... Now then, old friend. How about we talk? Once you reach my age, you do not often find people to speak about old times with."

The headmaster smiled.

"I thought that might be an image, but it looks like I was wrong. You really are a shrewd old man. However, I am not short-tempered enough or young enough to grow angry when I am fooled. If you have something to discuss, then let us discuss it. However, we will not rest."

Bouichirou charged forward once more, but with less speed than before. He swung his sword with repeated quick and sharp blows. This allowed him to maintain his form and continue attacking even after the sword was deflected.

"We did indeed defeat the previous demon king together, but that did not improve the situation. I could no longer trust what you told me," said the headmaster as he quickly rotated his arms to deflect all of the slashes.

"I was not lying when I said mankind will be destroyed!"

"I did not doubt that part. However, I began to wonder if you were wrong in your method of resolving that problem."

"I said mankind must take control of the gods to solve it! Humanity will decide what humanity does. It is the abdication of that responsibility that leads to our destruction!" shouted Bouichirou, but the headmaster shook his head.

"No. That is not what you wish for. Your fixation lies in that woman you spoke of."

Bouichirou's hands stopped moving then.

The two of them glared at each other at close range.

"I trusted you enough to tell you the truth 100 years ago. I never thought I would regret that decision," groaned Bouichirou quietly.

"I am still open to your trust. However, I learned something when we defeated the previous demon king. You merely want to take the demon king's place," stated the headmaster quietly.

Bouichirou was at a loss for words.

"You called it the Law of Identity, did you not? The women with that

property somehow resemble each other. Did you see that in Soga Keena?" asked the headmaster.

Bouichirou swung up his sword.

"Do you think I am so petty a man!?"

The sword produced a great roar as it shot toward the headmaster. He deflected it and replied.

"I do not. Your good heart is an irreplaceably wonderful thing. You possess great determination and know loneliness because of it. And that is why."

"We must control the gods. That is how to avoid this destruction. What is wrong with that!? What good is destroying the gods? There is nothing right about that! That is nothing more than obeying one's urge for destruction!"

"Debating it here is of no use. However, I feel that your methods are wrong."

"And so the demon king is in the right!?"

"No, he is wrong as well."

"Stop being so selfish! Is there anything worse than an old man speaking from the sidelines!?"

"I was young 100 years ago."

The headmaster deflected Bouichirou's sword and stepped back. He was out of breath now.

"But I suppose I am no longer young."

Meanwhile, Bouichirou was not out of breath.

"I am not actually all that pressed for time. I can speak for a little while longer."

Bouichirou held up his sword once more and began a slow advance.

"I am not changing my strategy. Those that can fly can handle this flying enemy. That makes this simple."

After speaking sharply to 2V, Eiko spoke into her telepathic communicator to give orders to the confused battlefield.

" platoons 1 and 2 to the main entrance, 3 to side entrance, 4 to the connecting passageway. Move away from the demon king and await further order. Prepare to enter the school."

Eiko split off a small portion of her troops and had them prepare for

simultaneous entry.

"That will make it easier for your opponent to defend. Why are you splitting up your troops to send them in bit by bit?" protested 2V.

Eiko glared back at him and explained, "Because there is a danger of them growing desperate and blowing up the school building. And this is the demon king's army. Stopping the demon king is most important."

"Yes, if you had a plan for doing so."

"Hmph. Of course I have a plan. You said I needed to look at this three-dimensionally, but that just means I need to use the people who can fly."

Eiko grabbed her telepathic communicator once more.

"All Hattori forces are to use everything they have to take out the demon king and the black dragon."

Eiko waited for a response. The commander of the Hattori family was Hattori Junko. Eiko could not hear that girl's voice coming from the communicator.

"What is it, Junko? Did you hear me or not?" asked Eiko with a cruel smile.

"Understood!" roared back a voice.

Eiko grimaced for an instant, but laughed in amusement after ending the telepathic connection.

“Ha ha ha! That should do it, right? A lot of them can fly and it seems they have that clown Brave with them, too! Now, let’s see how Junko chooses to fight!”

Eiko began to watch over the battle situation, but 2V frowned where she could not see him.

“She’s even worse a commander than I thought... I knew she would be bad, but I cannot have the situation growing too unfavorable.”

As he muttered to himself so she could not hear, 2V lightly gestured with his right hand to call over a subordinate.

A single waiting messenger soldier made his way into the tent.

Those around did not notice, but this was an odd action. As a member of CIMO 8, 2V had no authority to give orders to a soldier.

But the reason for this soon became apparent. The expression of the messenger soldier who leaned in toward 2V had the characteristic lack of self seen in L’Isle-Adams.

“How about we take the command for ourselves?” said 2V quietly.

He and the L’Isle-Adam messenger soldier exchanged a glance. That

glance held the distinctive light of mana. When the L'Isle-Adam nodded back, a clear sense of self could be detected in its eyes.

This was the technique 2V excelled at. He would transfer his will to a L'Isle-Adam and control it as his own body. And the L'Isle-Adams left with the military's odd jobs had been remodeled to accept 2V's will.

"Now, what should we do next?" 2V asked Eiko.

Eiko began to explain what she was preparing to do, but 2V was barely listening. He was focused on sending the L'Isle-Adam messenger soldier to mix in with the infantry who were awaiting further orders.

"I wonder if things are going well for Bouichirou," muttered the messenger soldier with 2V's voice.

Notes:

Jump up ↑ Chinese martial arts term for neutralizing or controlling the direction of an opponent's attack. Known as Huajin in Chinese.

Chapter 2: So Many People Plotting Behind the Scenes

—Do I have no choice but to do it?

Junko realized she was hesitating over what she had supposedly already made up her mind over.

She stood on a battlefield, but the only enemy nearby was Akuto up in the air. Akuto was primarily taking action to hold back the soldiers approaching the school building. It may have partially been due to 2V's advice, but the unmotivated soldiers were moving as little as possible. The demonic beasts surrounding the school building remained in place, so Junko had not been faced with too much conflict. However, Eiko's new order had changed that.

—Come on. Do not hesitate.

Even as she gave that order to herself, many different thoughts raced through her mind.

—I know I have no choice but to obey my orders, but it was Eiko who gave the order. Simply doing what she says would be foolish. But this is for the sake of my family. No, but grandmother told me to follow my own will. But what does my will say? What do I want to do?

Junko's thoughts circled around and around like that, but the other Iga ninja still held a great grudge against Akuto. As soon as Junko had replied to Eiko's order, the members closest to the Hattori family of that 600-member ninja force had rushed to be the first to fly up into the air.

"We will take care of your grudge, young lady!" they all shouted.

They were the elite members, so almost all of them could use combat magic on their own. Five of them surrounded Akuto as he circled through the sky atop Peterhausen. They attacked Akuto with actions so coordinated they looked like a single being.

"Iga Ninja Art – Five Direction Magic Circle!"

The five ninja quickly changed their positions and followed through on each other's actions in an ideal formation. They attacked with swords, shuriken, and kusarigama. This powerful cooperative attack had likely been developed as a means of defeating giant demonic beasts.

"It has been a while since I fought, but I am glad to see human fighting methods have evolved!"

That cry of joy came from Peterhausen. That old dragon who was a relative of the gods seemed to be excited about fighting for the first time in 100 years.

But his master, Akuto, did not seem to be enjoying the fight.

"It is an unnecessary evolution. Plus, it isn't all that effective," he said disinterestedly.

He stood up atop Peterhausen's back, grabbed the leg of one of the attacking ninja, and swung him around to deflect the attacks from the other ninja.

"It seems they have planned what to do if a comrade is taken hostage, but they have difficulty handling unexpected events."

As Akuto spoke, he threw the ninja in his hands such that he knocked the evading ninja out of the air as well.

Seeing her men easily knocked back, Junko's blood rushed to her head in an instant.

"What do you think you are doing!?"

Junko jumped up. She reached for the sword at her waist. She placed a hand on one of the two hilts there, but quickly recalled it was the treasured sword of her family, the Sword of Sohaya. Only one chosen by the sword and by the god Suhara could draw that sword.



—Can I draw it? No, if I can't...

"Tch!"

Junko's grip switched over to the hilt of the short sword. She drew it, reversed her grip, and attacked Akuto with it.

This completely straightforward attack was stopped by Akuto barehanded. He tightly grabbed the blade.

"Kh..."

Junko grimaced. She pushed and pulled, but the short sword would not budge. And not even a drop of blood had flowed from Akuto's hand.

Akuto turned wordlessly toward Junko. The lack of malice in his eyes caused her to flinch back.

"Wha-...? Why are you looking at me like that!?"

Junko used the unmoving short sword as a pivot point and swung her leg around to kick at Akuto's face. Akuto easily avoided the kick by moving his head to the side. At the same moment, he let go of the short sword. Junko was sent spinning away from the momentum of her own kick.

"Kh...Wh-why...!?"

She did not shed tears, but she bit her lip. She could not stand that he was not even attempting to fight her. Her own powerlessness frustrated her to no end.

—It is like he does not even consider this a problem! I am his enemy yet he is not shaken in the slightest! Is that because I am too weak to be a

threat? Or is it because he does not care about me at all? ...Ahh! Why am I thinking about that!?

Junko sheathed her short sword. She then placed a hand on the Sword of Sohaya's hilt.

—If I only had the power to at least cut him once! If I did that, he would have to take me seriously!

"Why are you not worrying about me!?" shouted Junko.

As soon as she did, she realized she had unwittingly revealed her true thoughts.

—N-no...! Well, it is true...but it is not what I meant to say!

Junko charged forward with her hand still on the Sword of Sohaya, but she still could not draw it.

These two inconveniences put a look of shock on her face, but she could not end the momentum she had built up. She quickly approached Akuto with her hand still on the sword's hilt. She foolishly crashed straight into him.

"Ee!"

When Junko realized Akuto had caught her in his arms, she began to squirm. However, Akuto refused to let go.

"S-stop! What are you doing!?"

"I did not know you felt that way," said Akuto.

Junko stopped moving.

"Eh?"

"You are a more splendid person than me and you already have plenty of people following you. That is why I never considered that you might want me to worry about you."

Akuto made this comment by whispering in Junko's ear in a sincere voice.

"Y-you idiot... Have you forgotten the current situation?" rebuked Junko, but Akuto only shook his head and continued speaking.

"My fight is something only I can do, so I grew too focused on it. Once this is over, I will give you the attention you deserve."

"Th-the attention I deserve...?"

Junko's face explosively reddened and she sank down as all strength left her body.

"Take care."

Akuto gently held Junko's limp body in his arms and lowered her down. Her flight magic was still in effect, so she slowly floated down from the sky.

—Y-you idiot... If you say that, I will never be able to decide what to do...

Junko had descended mostly of her own will, but the Iga ninja watching from a distance did not see it that way.

"The young lady was defeated!"

"Ah! Damn that demon king! He fired magic at her from too close a range for her to escape!"

"Let's go! Once more!"

"Pour your anger into an Eight Direction Magic Circle Formation!"

The Iga ninja increased their numbers to eight for another attack against Akuto.

Peterhausen let out a sigh of exasperation when he saw it.

"I take back what I said. Even when they evolve, it just gives them more repetitive attacks..."

The black dragon swung a wing to blow the Iga ninja out of the air.

"They are only angry. Don't think too badly of them. I'm not sure why they're so angry though," said Akuto.

"More importantly, master, what should we do now? If there are no worthwhile opponents, there is no need to remain here. We should continue on to our objective."

"We can't do that. There is an opponent here we have to do something about."

Akuto was looking down toward Yuuko. She was Junko's younger sister and a famous idol. Her life had been put in danger when demonic beast mana had been put in her body, and Akuto's presence had affected her mind. She was half in a frenzy over her mistaken interpretation of Junko's fall, so she was flying up toward Akuto.

"That girl? You can ignore her. If you wish to save her life..."

Akuto cut off Peterhausen by pointing behind the girl.

"I am talking about him."

"You mean behind her?"

Peterhausen twisted his head around again and spotted another figure shooting up like a bullet behind Yuuko.

"Him!" shouted Peterhausen.

"Ohhhh!"

The figure slicing through the air in his ascent was Brave. He wore a special suit and was known as a hero who would appear anywhere to hunt down demonic beasts. His suit's output did not rely on mana, so the light enveloping him was not a mana light emission.

"I cannot detect any mana!" cried Peterhausen in surprise.

"Be careful. He can probably use a mana canceller."

Just as Akuto finished his warning, Peterhausen and Brave crossed paths.

The sound of metal striking metal was so loud that the soldiers on the ground could hear it.

After passing by, they put some distance between each other and faced each other.

Brave held up the high frequency blade claws coming from the back of his hand. He looked perfectly composed while Peterhausen's giant form

lurched to the side.

"Oh! Now this is a surprise! In the more than one hundred years since my creation, I have never before been injured!"

As if working to remain conscious, Peterhausen flapped his wings to stabilize himself.

"You're injured? Are you okay?" asked Akuto worriedly, but Peterhausen's lips lifted in a cruel smile.

"Am I okay? I am more worried about this strength welling up within me being too powerful. It is precisely this type of joy I have lived for! The claws growing from his hand are as hard as my own! This is an even opponent! Only this opponent has ever led me to realize the purpose of my existence! Do you understand? As my master, you must!"

"I understand. Those born with power will always end up isolated. And that is doubly true for the ones like you who do not weaken with time. But we need to be prepared to lose this time. Those claws have not yet shown the true power I saw before and he has other weapons as well," said Akuto.

In the video Akuto had seen, Brave's claws had vibrated at a high frequency. And he had yet to use the invisible wire that had instantly sliced through the demonic beasts surrounding him.

"Prepared to lose? Hah. I am always prepared to die, but I will never be prepared to lose," laughed Peterhausen.

"That's fine then," said Akuto sadly.

Brave stood in front of Yuuko who had caught up from below and whispered something to her. Yuuko must have agreed because she descended once more.

"It seems he is kind to women as well."

"As well?"

Ignoring Peterhausen's comment, Akuto pointed toward Brave.

"At any rate, if we do not do something about him, we cannot leave here."

"I see. You are right about that. He is a worthy opponent for us. Now, let us fight."

Peterhausen accelerated toward Brave.

Yuuko descended.

"Young lady, please do not be so reckless."

"Please leave this to us."

The ninja gathered worriedly around her, but she shook her head. She was not telling them she was fine. She pointed up into the air with a huge smile on her face.

"Don't worry. Brave has come to kill him. You all focus on killing the other demonic beasts," said Yuuko with the attitude of an idol.

A camera transmitting a live broadcast was on the battlefield and one cameraman was sticking especially close to Yuuko. That was likely keeping her acting more like an idol, but there was a madness in Yuuko that could not be fully explained by the camera.

"Everyone! Our orders don't matter! Brave will handle him, so we need to focus on raiding the school!"

Yuuko waved her hand to tell the others to come with her before she suddenly ran off.

The surrounding ninja were unsure what to do. Yuuko had blatantly announced she was disobeying her orders. And on top of that, Junko was the Iga commander.

When Junko had descended before Yuuko, she had said she was fine to the ninja gathering to protect her. However, she had to come forward and say something about Yuuko's actions.

"Yuuko! This is a battlefield! You cannot-..."

But her lecture was cut off midsentence. A cameraman and reporter had cut in.

"After being protected by the heroic Brave, Hoshino Yuri-chan is finally headed into battle! Yuri-chan! Yuri-chan!" The reporter pushed past Junko while calling out Yuuko's stage name. "Yuri-chan! Isn't this dangerous?"

"I'll be fine! Brave will punish the demon king for destroying our peace. That is why I need to hunt down the demonic beasts!"

Yuuko spoke plainly into the camera. It looked like a scene from a movie where a lovely idol was heading into battle after overcoming her fear. It was obvious she was acting, but the fact that this was a real battlefield would likely provide incredible excitement for the viewers.

And that was quickly proven to be the case. The voice of Eiko, their commander, came to Junko.

<The Hattori ninja forces are to let Yuuko do as she wishes.>

"Are you changing your orders?" asked Junko.

<Yes. This seems to have had quite an effect. You are fairly popular as well. You might be able to make an idol debut,> joked Eiko.

Eiko had allowed the broadcast in order to gain popularity, and it seemed she was receiving reports on the reactions from the viewers.

"...Understood," replied Junko with a feeling of disgust.

She belatedly continued after Yuuko and instructed the others to follow her.

The Hattori ninja forces advanced toward the school building with Yuuko in the lead. The unit that had been waiting near the school building had already begun battling the demonic beasts.

"Heh heh heh heh... The moment in which an enemy falls into your trap is wonderful every single time."

Fujiko grinned while watching the battle on several mana screens.

"You sound like a bad guy, senpai."

Keena gave her honest impressions as she watched Fujiko.

"I am a bad person," said Fujiko as if that was normal.

Once the student council president had left, Fujiko and Keena were alone in the small room, if the Cerberus was not counted. However, the room felt cramped due to the screens filling it.

While rushing between the screens, Fujiko gave orders to the different

demonic beasts. The footage on the screens came from the academy's surveillance cameras and Fujiko was using the cameras set up in locations crucial to her strategy. Simply put, they showed the locations the enemy was trying to enter through.

"This is progressing perfectly. The normal strategy at times like this is to besiege your enemy and wait for them to exhaust their supplies, but they cannot do that while broadcasting the battle. They could always attack the entire school building at once, but they are too afraid of the sacrifices that could cause. They can only attack simultaneously from the three optimal points of the main entrance, the back entrance, and the connecting passageway. You would almost think they want to fall into my trap! Ho ho ho ho ho."

Fujiko judged the timing while laughing.

The timing was the instant their enemy would enter. Some soldiers had constructed barricades near the school building. They had divided into a group hiding behind the barrier and firing their rifles and a group wielding swords preparing to charge in. The question was when those charging soldiers would take action.

Fujiko chose the demonic beasts with hard outer shells like crabs and turtles and had them stand outside. Rifle incantation bullets could not harm them. However, she had instructed the demonic beasts to fall back bit by bit. She was luring the enemy into a charge.

And then the soldiers received the order to charge from Eiko. It happened just after the Hattori ninja force was given permission to join the attack and it happened at the exact timing Fujiko had predicted.

The platoon leaders gave the signal to charge. The covering fire from the rifles grew thicker and incantation bullets filled with explosion magic caused intense explosions around each entrance to the school building. In the next instant, soldiers hidden by the smoke began their charge while covering for each other.

However, Fujiko's instructions to the demonic beasts came an instant sooner.

"Begin attacking each barrier! Target them from above!"

The demonic beasts began their attack simultaneously. The demonic beasts that could monitor their surroundings with sound waves accurately attacked the soldiers despite the smoke robbing them of their vision. The demonic beasts that could fly bypassed the smoke and explosions altogether and rushed toward the barricades.

The barricades had been constructed with attacks from the sky in mind. Not many of the soldiers could fly, but the platoon had a few that could. Those soldiers held large metal shields that functioned as mobile barricades, but there were simply too many demonic beasts. Helped by the fact that there was no official strategy for handling demonic beasts and the military's lack of experience in fighting them, the attack from above put them on the defensive.

The same was true for the infantry who had tried to charge the building. They must not have expected an attack from the demonic beasts because they were almost completely unable to respond. The flying demonic beasts had circled around behind them, so they were

unable to even return to the barriers.

"All men fight back!" shouted a platoon leader as if to say there was nothing left for them to do.

Most of the individual soldiers could not use magic, so they had no chance against a demonic beast in a one-on-one battle. The platoon leader's command was a hopeless one. The soldiers were blown away by the demonic beasts one after another and they were quickly rendered unable to fight.

Even so, the few soldiers who could use magic protected their fellow soldiers and abandoned the barricades to begin a retreat. This helped calm the chaos a bit, but the unit that had begun their charge was still caught in the middle of the chaos.

After seeing that the same scene was playing out at each of the three entrances, Fujiko laughed loudly.

"Oh ho ho ho ho ho! Such a wonderful victory! The difference in commanders could not be more obvious!"

As she watched on, Keena worriedly said, "I hope the soldiers are okay."

"Soldiers always fall back and leave the fight after they are injured. I cannot speak for 100 years ago, but they have a full medical unit now. And only a tiny percentage will be killed instantly. Also, you cannot win if you worry about that!"

Fujiko may have replied excitedly, but she did not order the demonic beasts to pursue the soldiers. Satisfied with routing all four platoons, Fujiko had the demonic beasts return to the school building.

“The Hattori ninja forces will arrive next. They are a powerful opponent where each individual can fight a demonic beast. I will need to change my strategy.”

Fujiko turned her focus toward the Hattori ninja forces advancing toward the main entrance. The screen showed Yuuko and Junko walking in the lead.

“Ah, it’s Junko-chan!” cried Keena worriedly.

Meanwhile, Fujiko grinned.

“This is perfect. I might never get a better chance to rid myself of a rival!”

“Ehh? You can’t do that!” said Keena while pouting her lips, but Fujiko ignored her.

“Ho ho ho. It is Hattori-san’s fault if she gets injured. Akuto-sama may forgive her for opposing him, but I will not!”

“Mh, you can’t do that. Right, Cerpie?” said Keena as she began stroking the Cerberus’s three heads.

"Please do not give it an odd nickname. And if you call it Cerpie, people might confuse it for the Kelpie, another type of demonic beast! ...Plus, I thought you did not like dogs."

"Dogs are scary. But he has three heads, so he isn't a dog."

"What kind of criteria is that...?"

"That doesn't matter. If you keep doing this war thing, you'll have to answer to me."

"Answer to you?" What are you even talking about?"

Fujiko looked puzzled at Keena's odd comment.

But the situation outside was not going to wait around. Fujiko had to immediately respond to the threat of the Hattori ninja forces.

"Here they come! Okay, let's go, demonic beasts!"

Eiko had changed her orders to the Hattori family, but the results of the battle had left her confused afterwards.

"N-no... Ahh! Don't fall apart just because the enemy came out! I need to send in a unit that can fight demonic beasts... Oh, right! I sent the Hattori family in. I can have the other units fall back and leave this to them. No, wait. That would give them all the popularity!"

The reason she had taken command in the first place was for her own popularity. If the Hattori family resolved everything, she would not achieve that goal.

"But the battle at the main entrance is a great visual that I hate to give up. Should I send in some Teruya troops? No, having them arrive when the battle is already won would be bad. Maybe I can bring down some of the airborne troops from the aircraft carrier.. Or should I send in the aircraft carrier itself?"

As Eiko worried over what to do, 2V spoke up from behind her.

"If you are troubled, we could lend a hand."

"Do you have an idea?"

The media was not currently in the command tent. Eiko could rely on 2V without worrying about shame or honor.

"One other member of the intelligence and magic office is here other than myself. I can have him handle this," said 2V in an amused tone.

He currently had his entire focus here rather than on controlling the L'Isle-Adam.

"What kind of person is he?"

"He is an infiltration and information gathering specialist. He is a bit of a strange person, though. His codename is..."

Eiko did not quite catch the name.

—Did he say Lovers? No, the name doesn't matter.

"What can he do?" she asked.

"I will have him hinder the Hattori family's advance. You can then send in a Teruya family unit."

"Is it really that simple?"

Eiko was skeptical, but 2V nodded.

"It is. I want you to win as much as you do. You have no reason to doubt me," he said lightly. He then pointed upwards. "If you do not hurry, that will make the situation more troublesome."

It soon became clear what 2V meant by "that".

An intense explosion occurred. Eiko's vision was filled with brilliant light and a shockwave arrived soon thereafter. The tent and the telepathic communicator were almost blown away. The sound of the explosion arrived last.

Eiko looked over and finally understood what had happened. A gigantic sphere of fire had appeared in midair. It was part of the clash between Akuto and Brave.

“Wh-what was that!? How can a human being do that!?” cried out Eiko.

“I feel the same. However, it seems that is the foe we must battle,” said 2V with an amused smile.

—He can defend against the plasma ball!?

Brave Hiroshi was shocked. He had expanded a sphere of plasma around him more as a means of defense than anything. Akuto had to have known that touching it would cause it to explode. Nevertheless, Akuto – or maybe Peterhausen – had not hesitated to charge directly into it. He had managed to withstand the great force of the plasma and attacked Hiroshi.

“If you are going to fight, make use of your body, youth!”

Peterhausen’s roar and attack came at the same moment. Hiroshi crossed his arms in an X to block the dragon’s claws before falling back.

—Make use of my body? But I have to calculate how to use my weapons...

Hiroshi complained in his head.

The Brave suit seemed to transfer its weapons and energy in from a different dimension. The heavier weaponry took some time before it could be reequipped.

Whether he could use his weapons or not was displayed on his visor and the countdown reverberated in his head. He could reroute the power used to move the suit into an attack, but that would leave him unable to move for several seconds.

"I'm not going to listen to your lecture!"

Hiroshi had his claw blades vibrate at a high frequency as he sliced them toward Peterhausen. Claw clashed with claw and intense sparks flew through the air.

"Wire!"

Hiroshi slid his left hand along and let loose the monomolecular wire. Peterhausen refused to touch it. The dragon moved down and Hiroshi shot forward.

"Tch!"

"Ohhhh!"

Peterhausen and Hiroshi soared through the sky as if intertwining. They

produced a violent wind. That wind grew into a tornado which blew away everything nearby.

The soldiers positioned along their path were mostly blown away and the ones ahead of their path ran away screaming.

In the center of that tornado, Hiroshi shouted at Akuto.

"Speaking of that lecture, why aren't you fighting!?"

Peterhausen replied for Akuto.

"I am the one fighting, not my master! I wish to fight!"

"I'm not asking you! You! Why are you fighting!?"

Hiroshi was speaking only to Akuto.

"Because I want to kill the gods. That is all."

Akuto's voice was unexpectedly calm.

"What will that accomplish!? You will only jeopardize people's way of life, make demonic beasts run rampant, and spread destruction! With your power, you should be able to guide people in a better direction," roared Hiroshi.

Akuto replied, "If I could do that, I would. Did you never think that there is a reason I can't do that?"

"Eliminating that which threatens people's livelihoods or spreads destruction can only be a good thing! The number of criminals has dropped thanks to the gods. All that remain are the truly crazy ones!"

"Do I look crazy to you?"

"No, you don't. But whether you are truly crazy or not, your actions are still insane!"

"In that case, attack me. But if I do not look crazy to you, then I hope you will realize that there is legitimacy in my actions."

"Then what is that legitimacy!?"

"Mankind has given names to what is nothing more than a system and they think those names have physical form. That is what needs to be eliminated."

"That abstract nonsense is not a real answer!"

"Do you really think I can get to the heart of the issue by keeping this simple? I am saying mankind is relying too much on a story. The gods are only gods because we named them as such. People are not looking at the truth or the connections between each other. They are only forcing others into the story they have dreamed up for themselves. People seek good fortune in this story where the gods stand at the top, but they also use

those standards to kill and to wage war. And so I will..."

Akuto trailed off there.

"You will what!?"

Hiroshi shot toward Akuto.

Peterhausen was unable to avoid this strike, but Akuto caught the high frequency blade in one hand.

The high frequency vibration caused mana light to spread in ripples.

As if pushing those ripples aside, Akuto twisted the high frequency blade and Hiroshi's arm along with it.

"I will inform mankind that their story has lost," he said.

"But that makes you a true demon king!" shouted back Hiroshi.

Hiroshi tried to wrap Akuto up in the wire coming from his left hand. Akuto stopped the wire in midair by using mana rather than touching it directly.

"That is a corruption caused by the story!"

Akuto sent Hiroshi flying back.

Hiroshi fired lasers from his back while righting himself in midair. As those lasers changed trajectory in midair, they looked like glowing spider legs growing from his back.

“But there are people who are suffering from nothing more than your presence! And there is a girl who cannot survive without relying on the current gods!”

As Hiroshi shouted out, the lasers shot toward Akuto one after another with slight time delays between them.

“There are people using the story to fool everyone for their own purposes! The people you mention are a victim of that!”

Akuto blew away the laser blasts with his aura alone. The deflected lasers stabbed into the surface, causing the soldiers to run around in panic.

“Don’t be selfish! How do you plan to take responsibility!?”

Hiroshi called in the high temperature plasma ball that was finished reequipping.

“I will take care of everything afterwards! But only once the story of the gods and religion has been ended!”

Akuto ordered Peterhausen to fire a metal stake. The spiral-carved stake

shot toward Hiroshi like a missile.

“No! You can save people right now! Why won’t you remove the demonic beast mana from her body!? You absorbed the mana from a dog demonic beast once. Why can’t you do it now!?”

Hiroshi was forced to defend against the metal stake by sending the high temperature plasma at it. Repeated overwhelming explosions occurred and the shockwaves violently shook the surrounding area.

Peterhausen and Akuto slipped through the gaps in the explosions to charge toward Hiroshi.

Before Hiroshi could right himself in midair, he was forced to defend against Peterhausen’s fangs.

“You know me, don’t you?” asked Akuto in a tone that said he was not expecting an answer.

—Whoops. I got too worked up.

Hiroshi regretted saying that, but he did not respond. After coming this far, he found he did not particularly care if his identity was revealed.

The more pressing issue was the dragon’s maw before his eyes. He was just barely holding the upper and lower fangs open with his hands, but he would be helpless if the dragon fired a metal stake now.

—Is there any way of handling this?

The computer voice installed in Hiroshi's visor answered his thoughts.

<Will you switch to anti-demon king combat mode?>

—Is it dangerous?

<There is no danger. It allows you to kill a demon king with absolute certainty.>

—Absolute certainty...

Those words gave Hiroshi a chill. He felt as if he had been fighting based on a certain trust in Akuto so far. However, doubts welled up within his chest when it came to killing him with "absolute certainty".

But when Hiroshi saw a metal stake being produced within Peterhausen's throat, he had to make a decision.

"Dammit! Switch to anti-demon king combat mode!"

With that announcement, the Brave suit emitted a light that Hiroshi had never seen from it before.

The demon king and Brave's battle left the soldiers below in chaos, but

the Hattori ninja forces remained perfectly composed.

However, the demonic beasts had not fallen into chaos either. As a result, the only proper battle was being fought in front of the main entrance.

The demonic beasts were employing a strategy of attacking in groups of three, but their organizational ability was still inferior to that of the Hattori ninja forces. They were unable to keep up with the splendid movements of the ninja who were providing cover for each other. The demonic beasts were cut down one after another.

The live broadcast focused on Yuuko, so her actions had to have stood out the most to the viewers. The viewers saw her cut down a demonic beast with her ninja sword and give orders to the ninja around her.

But in reality, the Hattori ninja forces were spread out around Yuuko because they could not allow any attacks to reach the cameraman and reporter who were near her. The only demonic beasts that reached her were either injured or were isolated from their fellow demonic beasts. This made it much easier for Yuuko to defeat them.

“Can you see Hoshino Yuri-chan!? Can you see her powerfully fighting these demonic beasts despite being an idol!? This is the new feminine form for our modern age. Strong yet beautiful. This is the goddess we have all dreamed of seeing!”

Despite what was actually happening, the reporter was enthusiastically and excitedly raising his voice as he described Yuuko’s actions. The broadcast Eiko was counting on for herself was being overwhelmingly

filled with support for Yuuko.

—But I am not sure this is a good thing to gain popularity for.

As Junko glanced over at the situation around Yuuko, she cut down an approaching demonic beast.

—She has always cared about her comrades, but she was not the type to hunt demonic beasts so gleefully. Is the mana having some sort of negative effect on her?

There was too much Junko had to think about.

And then...



"You are Hoshino Yuri-chan's older sister, right?"

The reporter was holding the microphone toward Junko.

Junko did not reply and the reporter gave her a reproachful look.

—Is he dissatisfied that the situation is not progressing according to the story he had imagined?

Junko was displeased, but fortunately a demonic beast fell from the sky behind the reporter. It appeared to have already lost the ability to fight, but Junko took the opportunity to stab at it with her short sword.

The silver blade shot by next to the reporter's face.

"Ee!" shrieked the reporter.

The short sword stabbed into the demonic beast behind the reporter and warm blood spurted out.

"I am indeed her sister," said Junko as she twisted her body to avoid the blood.

The demonic beast collapsed toward the reporter and he ran away.

—Hm. That is one less annoyance I have to deal with.

However, that instant had been shown in the broadcast, so her popularity had suddenly jumped up. And unbeknownst to Junko, this had an effect on Eiko's command.

"You have to be kidding me! What is this Lovers guy doing!?"

Eiko was panicking. After she saw the reaction to the broadcast, she shouted at 2V.

Akuto and Hiroshi were continuing their superhuman battle in the air. This prevented the army from taking part in the battle and they had nearly been routed despite almost no casualties. In order to hide this disadvantage from the public, the broadcast was focusing on the Hattori ninja forces who were actually putting up a fight. However, Eiko could not stand that this was increasing even Junko's popularity.

"There is no way I am inferior to her! God dammit. Why do those stupid men always praise the virgins!?"

As Eiko began complaining about unrelated issues, she further pressed 2V.

"Where is this Lovers or whatever his name is?"

"Do not worry. He will handle this."

As soon as 2V gave that annoyed response, an eerie shadow cut across the battlefield displayed on a mana screen. 2V let out a whistle.

"There he is."

After seeing how well the situation was progressing, Junko debated

whether she should continue following Eiko's instructions. If they continued on, they could clearly secure the main entrance as an entry point. However, that might be playing into their enemy's hands.

Also...

—If I continue on, I will be Sai and senpai's enemy.

Junko was still unsure what to do. She hated her own lack of decisiveness. No, she may have already made up her mind deep down. It was just that honor and family were keeping her from acting.

—In the end, it comes down to my cowardice.

Junko knew it was unlikely she could do anything even if she could change that, but she still regretted it.

—I wish I had the power to change it.

This was the first time she had ever hoped for political power rather than military power. She had always helped others almost too much and her personality ensured she was never bothered by training or her studies. For that reason, she had never understood why anyone would use their power for their own desires. However, she now understood, even if only slightly.

As the waves of demonic beast attacks settled down, she placed a hand on the Sword of Sohaya's hilt once more. She pulled, but it still refused to come out.

—I cannot draw it unless I am chosen by god... But grandmother said it only had to be something convenient for the god. So what does the god want in this situation?

As Junko thought on that, a demonic beast moved in her peripheral vision.

—They are not going to let me rest, are they?

Junko drew her short sword once more and moved forward. The demonic beast resembled a human, but it moved on four long legs.

—No... This is...!

A bad feeling caused Junko to stop in her tracks. Unlike the other demonic beasts, this one was not attacking in a group. And it did not resemble any of the others.

Her bad feeling turned out to be dead on. This creature swung its arm like a whip. And that arm stretched out and swept through the space Junko had been before she quickly jumped back.

"This does not look like a demonic beast," muttered Junko.

Its skin shined like rubber. Its head had no hair and glistened. It looked like a human covered entirely in tights or like some new type of creature, but its arms were too long to be human and some of its joints seemed to

bend in the opposite direction of a human's. However, its aura was not that of a demonic beast.

—In that case, why is it attacking us?

Junko was confused, but she had no time to investigate. It must have deemed Junko a formidable opponent because it jumped past her and began attacking the rest of the Hattori ninja forces.

"Watch out!" cried Junko.

The ninja heard Junko's warning and saw the enemy arrive, but several of them were still blown away in an instant.

—It can't be!

Junko was shocked. She had clearly seen what had blown them away. Every single one of the attacked ninja had tried to defend against the strike with their swords. However, that rubber-like arm seemed to have both flexibility and durability. Unbelievably, the swords were unable to slice through the arm. It looked like a contradictory existence such as a soft metal rod. The areas struck by the swords bent, but the tension snapped back and blew away the ones holding the swords.

"Avoid that arm!"

The Hattori ninja forces reacted immediately. While all shouting that warning, they attacked the mysterious creature. Several were beaten down by irregular movements, but five of them made it right up to the

creature. They stabbed their swords into it simultaneously.

However, their eyes all opened wide in surprise. The swords had definitely pierced its body...or so it seemed at first. In reality, it was similar to stabbing a rubber sheet with a stick. The creature's body stretched and the swords stabbed through to the other side of its body, but the skin was never broken.

"Gh!"

"How can this be!?"

The Hattori ninja forces let out cries of surprise. Like rubber snapping back into place, the creature's body returned to normal. The elasticity caused the swords to fly up into the sky and blew away the ones holding tightly onto those swords.

"Stand back. If I use heat...!"

With that comment, one of the Hattori ninja forces decided to use magic. He produced a ball of fire which flew toward the rubber creature. However, that ball of fire was annihilated by flames fired from the rubber monster's mouth.

This was one of the reasons battles between those skilled in magical combat ultimately came down to hand-to-hand combat. If one used magic to cause damage, mana could be used to negate the effects. However, only humans could do that. Demonic beasts could not.

—It is powerful... But why is a human attacking us?

As Junko's confusion grew, she ordered the Hattori ninja forces to fall back.

And with perfect timing, armored warriors advanced into the area the Hattori family had held before. They belonged to the Teruya family's forces.

"You fools! Stay back! That thing is dangerous! Stay away!" shouted Junko.

But those armored warriors completely ignored her. They created an orderly line and advanced.

"Wait!" she shouted again, but the rubber monster surprisingly disappeared into the school building.

Thanks to the Hattori ninja forces defeating the demonic beasts, the main entrance had been freed, but no one had thought someone like that would be the first to pass through the gate.

"The most powerful demonic beast has fled from the Teruya family's army!" shouted the reporter following Yuuko around.

It may indeed have looked that way to those who had not directly fought that rubber monster.

—But from how that thing fought, I doubt it would fall back no matter what enemy arrived. That must mean... but it can't be...

Junko grew suspicious.

"So that is who you were talking about. You could have told me you said Rubbers and not Lovers!"

Eiko grinned as she watched the battle on a mana screen. It seemed Rubbers's appearance had prevented the Hattori family from taking too much of the credit.

"I just wish I could have been out there to put on a show," said Eiko jokingly.

2V, on the other hand, gave a serious response.

"Hm... That probably would have worked. He is a masochist, so he would have gladly let you hit him."

"Is that thing human?"

"He is such a masochist that he experimented with magically altering his own body. Thanks to that, he no longer looks human. However, he is a powerful force in magical combat. Now, as planned-..."

Just as 2V said that, something even he had not predicted occurred.

The Teruya family's armored warriors had immediately tried to enter the school building, but their advance suddenly came to a halt. A moment later, one of the armored warriors in the lead was sent flying backwards. As he flew back, he knocked back the others behind them as if they were bowling pins.

"What?"

Eiko peered into the mana screen in surprise.

With relaxed movements, a figure stepped out into the space in which the Teruya family armored warriors had been. Of all people, it was the student council president, Lily Shiraishi.

"Do not enter the school without the student council's permission."

Lily rotated her right wrist as it made crackling noises.

This angered Eiko.

"Dammit! To hell with her! Just take her out!"

Eiko gave orders to her family's men, but Lily knocked several of them away with her extending arms before those orders could reach them. The attack was not as powerful as Rubbers's, but it was still plenty strong.

"You worthless men! I'll send in another unit to..."

In her irritation, Eiko finally checked the state of the overall battle.

And she was shocked at what she found. Due to victory being almost assured once they made their way into the school building, she had given almost no orders to the other units. The ground forces were almost entirely unscathed, but they had fallen into chaos as they tried to avoid the effects of the battle between Akuto and Hiroshi. Not only did she not have almost a thousand soldiers divided into platoons and awaiting orders, but the soldiers did not even know where any of their fellow soldiers were.

And the midair battle between Akuto and Hiroshi was still ongoing. Its fierceness had caused the soldiers' morale to drop like a rock. A clearly superhuman battle was unfolding overhead and the elites of the Hattori and Teruya families were battling the demonic beasts ahead.

Those demonic beasts had been driven back all at once by the Hattori family's attack, but they had begun to gather at the main entrance once more. And at every other point around the school building, the demonic beasts were almost entirely unscathed.

"A-am I...losing?"

As that possibility finally occurred to Eiko, her face paled in fear.

If she lost, her incompetence would be revealed to the entire empire. And on top of that, her patricide would likely come to light as well. If that happened, she would be completely ruined.

"Sh-should I order the entire army to attack...?" muttered Eiko.

"No, you still have other options left," said 2V frantically.

Eiko still had most of her military force. They had only been thrown into chaos. If she gave appropriate orders, they could reorganize and recover. Also, the aircraft carrier and the elite airborne troops waiting onboard were not affected by the chaos. Eiko had merely given into fear and could not think rationally.

—Using her is not easy when she is this incompetent. It looks like being a bit reckless and aiming for mutual destruction is my only chance.

2V changed his mental strategy.

"Have the ground troops fall back and send in the aircraft carrier. I said to avoid damaging the surrounding area, but in the current situation, no one will blame you for destroying the school building. It will look like the demon king and his side are the ones destroying everything, after all."

2V's words must have sounded promising to Eiko.

"I-I see... You're right!"

And Eiko gave the order to send in the aircraft carrier.

—Sigh. What a pain.

2V secretly grinned. He then focused his mind.

A trap he had set up ahead of time activated. Completely ordinary soldiers assigned to each unit began moving according to 2V's will. They were L'Isle-Adams disguised as humans. They were not the standard autonomous variety. These dolls would have no will of their own without the intervention of 2V's magic. About 50 of them had been slipped into the army in all.

One of 2V's L'Isle-Adams had of course been sent to the bridge of the aircraft carrier.

"Begin the advance. Approach the school building and mop up the demonic beasts along the walls."

After having Eiko's orders relayed by the captain, 2V's doll nodded with an innocent expression as it held the aircraft carrier's helm.

—Now then. Let's make sure this works.

"This is quite bad."

Fujiko thought as she stood before the underground altar.

"What is it?" asked Keena.

"The aircraft carrier Genkaku has begun to move."

Fujiko manipulated several mana screens to display Genkaku from various angles. The giant ship had been stopped a short distance from the schoolyard, but it had begun to slowly move toward them.

"Is it really that bad for it to come here? You have an idea, right?" asked Keena.

Her innocence irritated Fujiko.

"Of course I have an idea! But it is a last resort. I will destroy the school building."

"The school building will go boom?"

"If I have the demonic beasts destroy it just barely underground, it will all sink down, right? There is nothing more I can do about the aircraft carrier's attack. But doing that signifies our loss. We need to flee when that happens."

"Then wouldn't we have lost right away if they had sent in the aircraft carrier at the beginning?"

"Stop pointing out the flaws in my plan! Yes, we would have. But I thought the aircraft carrier would pursue Akuto-sama. I never expected he would be held in place by that thug named Brave." Fujiko was regretful and she looked over to another mana screen. "Also, it hurts that I lost track of that rubber man even though he has to be in the building

somewhere."

"Really? How did you lose track of him?"

"If I knew that, I would not be having so much trouble! Where did he get off to...? I have some demonic beasts with good noses searching for him, but I can only hope his presence does not become a fatal factor for us. Honestly, if Akuto-sama could only take care of Brave!"

Fujiko wailed as she scratched at her hair.

"I told you not to fight, remember?"

Keena had been talking normally, but she suddenly fell silent.

"What is it?"

Fujiko glanced back toward Keena. Keena did not appear much different from normal, but she looked like she was dreaming.

"Nothing, senpai. Hey, what do you think of this world's situation?"

"What?"

Fujiko turned around in surprise.

"I am asking you about the sorrow of people fighting each other

despite all wanting a world without fighting,” said Keena.

Fujiko found Keena’s behavior odd, but it did not seem dangerous. She felt wrong not giving an answer, so she replied while continuing her work.

“Just because they are fighting does not mean it is a sorrowful situation. If the options are a massacre or a war, you can only welcome war. A world without war would be a world where everyone can carry out a massacre,” said Fujiko, but she received no answer.

“Then you’ll have to answer to me,” said Keena.

The usual Keena was back.

“...Is that a phrase you learned recently?”

“Eh? What?”

Keena looked confused.

—This is anti-demon king combat mode?

Hiroshi was confused by the lack of change. His output, his weapons, and his energy transfer speed had not improved.

However, he soon realized that there was less of a burden on him when he blocked Peterhausen's claws and that his attacks had more force behind them.

—What is going on?

Hiroshi was amazed at the effect of his first attack. The force of his attacks gradually grew and they soon reached a level that threatened to blow Peterhausen out of the sky.

"The mana is being negated," Akuto told Peterhausen.

"So that is what this is. My internal mana is not being affected much, but I cannot transfer it outside of my body very well," groaned Peterhausen.

"We need to put some distance between us."

Peterhausen shook his head at that suggestion.

"No. He is faster. We must not turn our backs to him."

"Then let's come up with some means of handling this," said Akuto. The aircraft carrier then slowly moved into view. "Not good. That thing's started to move."

"And it seems to be targeting the school building. They must no longer care about appearances."

Peterhausen saw it too.

The infantry down below must have been relieved by Genkaku's presence because they began reorganizing and falling back into formation. Unbeknownst to Akuto and Peterhausen, this morale recovery was thanks to the work of the dolls 2V had slipped into the army's ranks.

"Do we have to deal with two enemies now?" muttered Akuto.

Peterhausen grinned.

"Exactly. But that is not necessarily a bad thing."

"Are you rejoicing over another powerful enemy?"

"No, it is more than that. From my past experiences, I know that large weapons like that have mana producers inside. They need it to power their weaponry."

"I see. It's dangerous, but I guess we should approach it as we fight."

Akuto sent Peterhausen toward the aircraft carrier.

Genkaku was known as an aircraft carrier, but it contained an airborne unit rather than actual aircrafts. However, the airborne troops' equipment was not specialized for being dropped to the ground. They wore reinforced outfits that allowed them to fly and fight in midair and even

perform bombings. They looked like they were carrying airplanes on their backs and they were especially feared by the countries outside the empire. The aircraft carrier powered itself and produced mana, so it could be sent into areas in which mana was not disseminated. It had been designed to defeat enemies who used the internal-combustion engines of an older age.

Depending on the situation, each individual airborne soldier could function as a gun battery. If they carried long-range cannons, they could line up on the deck and use their judgment and magic ability to fire accurately even at long-range.

Airborne soldiers who had those long-range cannons on their backs and were ready to fire were currently lining up on the deck. When they saw Akuto, they began preparing to fire.

"Our target is the demon king and the demonic beasts. Unless otherwise ordered, you may choose whatever target you wish. Finish them off while keeping the damage to the Constant Magic Academy school building and the surrounding area within reasonable limits. The one known as Brave is not a target. However, do not worry about accidentally hitting him."

Those were the instructions from their commander. The airborne soldiers did not look nervous as they prepared their long-range cannons and awaited orders.

"Begin the attack."

Arrows of light fired from all of the soldiers lined up on the aircraft

carrier deck.

Peterhausen flew toward the aircraft carrier in a splendid trajectory that avoided what looked like torrential rain falling sideways.

Hiroshi followed and avoided the initial attack, but he must have realized that what looked like particles of light were being annihilated around him because he stopped avoiding all but the attacks heading straight toward him.

"Our power is back, but we are still at a disadvantage," laughed Peterhausen.

"You didn't think about what to do after this?" asked Akuto in shock.

"Is that a problem?" replied Peterhausen calmly.

"No, I suppose not. At any rate, it's time to think," answered Akuto.

A few airborne soldiers jumped from the aircraft carrier. They held spear-like weapons. They looked well suited for use against a black dragon.

"It looks like we do not have to think after all."

"Don't sound so happy about that," complained Akuto.

"Joy should be honestly expressed!"

As Peterhausen let out a roar of delight, he flew in between five of the airborne soldiers. The soldiers were likely doing their very best, but Peterhausen flew circles around them like he was playing with some puppies. He then rushed forward, stopped, and let loose an intense attack.

Akuto was being directly targeted as well, so he swept aside the spears with his hands, grabbed and bent them, and threw back balls of fire.

"These seem to be the elites!" rejoiced Peterhausen like a child.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," said Akuto with a shrug.

However, the battle quickly ceased to be pleasant for Peterhausen. A figure appeared in front of them. Needless to say, it was Hiroshi.

"Out of the way!"

Akuto struck one of the airborne soldiers following him around. It was not really an attack. He only shoved the soldier, but that sent the man tumbling through the air. He stalled and he began falling in a tailspin.

Hiroshi was looking only at Akuto.

"He really is our only true enemy," complained Peterhausen.

"It looks like we have to settle this," said Akuto with resolve in his voice.

Panic had fallen over the aircraft carrier bridge.

"How are we being toyed with this much?"

The captain's voice was filled with more fear than confusion. The screen that displayed information on the state of the battle was currently showing several points of light. Those lights were indicated as allies, but their statuses were changing to "incapacitated" one after another. The screen displaying actual video footage also made it clear that the airborne troops were at a disadvantage.

"We are the ones here with combat experience! What are you people doing!?"

The captain raised his voice, but no one replied. He was not simply shouting out in anger. He had done nothing wrong strategically. They were simply up against too dangerous an opponent. It was completely true that each individual soldier had to give this their all.

The most dangerous individual was Hiroshi. He was not actively attacking the military, but the airborne troops who approached him would lose their mana which would incapacitate them. They were rendered unable to fight properly.

Akuto was of course their worst enemy. Peterhausen calmly used the airborne troops as shields. Akuto was more reserved, but he still stole the airborne soldiers' weapons and would lead Peterhausen to use the

aircraft carrier's armor as a wall to avoid attacks.

"Do not let them do as they wish! Do not let the country's dignity waver in the eyes of the people!" roared the captain, but the silence remained.

No. A single voice spoke up in response.

"How about I handle this, captain?"

The man spoke in a disrespectful tone and the look on the captain's face changed.

"Who said that!?"

The soldier holding the helm raised his hand.

"It was me, the helmsman. I'm asking for freedom to do what I want."

Everyone on the bridge was shocked to hear that un-military-like tone. Everyone turned toward the helmsman. And they all realized something impossible. They did not recognize him. They wondered how they had not noticed it before.

"Who are you!?"

"Like I said: the helmsman. For the moment, at least," said 2V.

"Like hell you are! Did you sneak in here using hypnotism magic!?" shouted the captain.

At the same moment, he motioned with his hand for the secondary helmsman to take out the helmsman.

The secondary helmsman nodded and immediately fired a magical explosion at the helmsman. The explosion hit the helmsman's head dead on. Flames burst out for an instant and then smoke wafted up. He had perfectly controlled his explosion so as to kill his target while not harming the bridge.

The helmsman's head was gone. The secondary helmsman brought his hand to the console to take control of the ship, but the main control refused to transfer over.

"Wha-!?"

He looked back over at the helmsman and saw an uncanny sight. The headless helmsman still held the helm as before.

"A-a doll!"

The lack of blood told the secondary helmsman what was happening.

"That's right. But it's already too late."

A voice came from somewhere on the headless helmsman. The bridge

crew shot to their feet and tried to stop him, but the aircraft carrier shook greatly.

That was when the captain and everyone else on the bridge realized what 2V was trying to do. The aircraft carrier was gigantic, but its high output engine was enough to provide the same mobility as a light aircraft. The problematic air resistance could be reduced by controlling the air itself with mana.

The aircraft carrier took an action that showed no concern for those aboard. That giant ship was over 350 meters long and yet it performed the maneuver known as the Immelmann turn. The ship rapidly ascended before rotating sideways. After that turn, it began to descend.

Those inside who were not strapped down and the airborne troops on the deck who had not expected it were all tossed around and slammed into the ship.

However, Genkaku did not lower its speed. And its target soon became clear.

—Why is this happening!?

Hiroshi was irritated. He felt as if his irritation over not knowing how to handle his fight with Akuto was exploding out.

In the end, he knew that his irritation came from his trust of Akuto. That was why he could not stand what Akuto was doing.

“Ohhh!”

Hiroshi charged in once more. He had realized the aircraft carrier was producing mana, but he could still fight evenly. And when separated from the ship, he had an overwhelming advantage. His current attack sent a fierce impact into Peterhausen. It had obviously sent the dragon flying farther than before.

—I just have to neutralize him! If I can only defeat the black dragon!

Hiroshi quickly accelerated to take advantage of this opportunity. He advanced while avoiding the airborne troops raining down from above. He approached Akuto. He could clearly see Akuto’s expression.

However, he had been so focused on Akuto that he had not paid enough attention to the situation as a whole. Why had they moved away from the aircraft carrier? And why were the airborne soldiers suddenly raining down from above? Those facts had not properly registered with him.

“Haaahhhh!”

Hiroshi charged in while expanding a high-temperature plasma ball, but Akuto’s expression confused him.

Akuto was clearly looking somewhere other than Hiroshi. When he did look over at Hiroshi, a kind expression appeared on his face.

—Wh-why is he giving me that look?

Hiroshi grew confused and Akuto threw a stolen airborne soldier spear at him. He was targeting the high-temperature plasma ball.

“!”

Hiroshi could have avoided the spear if it had been targeting him directly, but avoiding an attack on the high-temperature plasma ball was more difficult. He released the plasma, creating an explosion that enveloped the spear. The mana canceller was of no use here. Hiroshi was blown backwards.

—He used that expression to get in a surprise attack!? But I can recover right away from that!

Hiroshi righted himself while keeping his eyes on Akuto, but to his surprise, his vision was suddenly dyed gray.

—What!?

An instant later, he finally realized what had happened.

The gray he saw was Genkaku. The nose of the giant aircraft carrier had passed by right in front of his eyes.

And it did so at unbelievable speed. The aircraft carrier cut by at a speed that rivaled his own.

But Hiroshi also saw something else: Akuto and Peterhausen had been struck by the ship's nose.

—It can't be... That's insane...

Hiroshi instructed the suit's internal computer to display some footage on his visor. The footage was a replay of what had occurred just a few seconds earlier.

The spherical nose of the ship had indeed struck Akuto and Peterhausen as it dropped at high speed. After striking Peterhausen directly on the side, Genkaku continued descending toward the ground.

"Ahh! Aniki!"

A mixture of shock and regret let that cry escape Hiroshi's lips.

Genkaku continued to drop at the same speed before it began flying horizontally just above the surface. It then slammed directly into the school building.

Smoke and a great noise of impact spread throughout the surrounding area. The nose had completely sunk into the center of the school building. The objects scattered around the school building were likely the corpses of demonic beasts. Some soldiers who had failed to escape may have been among them as well.

—Th-they were crushed?

Hiroshi descended toward the school building in disbelief. He broke through the smoke and followed the deck to the nose. A giant hole had been opened in the school's wall. A portion of the wall had been reduced to rubble and was scattered across the deck, but what he found inside the hole was even worse. The spherical nose was almost entirely buried in rubble. It was nigh impossible to tell what was underneath.

"I-it can't be..."

He descended within the school building.

As the cloud of dust began to clear, Hiroshi sensed a presence and took a defensive stance.

He saw a tall man in a hallway on the border between the crumbled wall and the floor where the building retained its original form.

—Wh—who is that?

Hiroshi was bewildered by the man's unusual presence.

"Well, this certainly was fortunate. It may have been the one piece of good fortune in my unlucky life."

The man, Bouichirou, spoke and laughed.

The headmaster was buried under rubble at Bouichirou's feet. The old

man was breathing, but he was badly injured.

"D-damn you!" yelled Hiroshi in a cracking voice.

However, Bouichirou put away his sword and waved his hand.

"Please wait, hero who battles the demon king. If you have that suit, I assume you are of the Miwa family?"

"Th-then you..." Hiroshi gasped. "Are you the one who left us this suit!?"

Hiroshi was left speechless when he realized that this man matched his father's description perfectly.

"Nice to meet you, I suppose. I am Yamato Bouichirou," said Bouichirou in a satisfied voice.

Chapter 3: Akuto and the Flying Aircraft Carrier

"Y-your name does not matter. Who are you and what are you doing here?" asked Hiroshi.

He was flustered and he did not have time to wait for an answer. He had to help the headmaster. While keeping a cautious eye on Bouichirou, he began digging the old man out of the rubble.

The headmaster was conscious. However, he was more concerned about Bouichirou than grateful for being rescued.

"S-stop him..." said the headmaster.

His body had shriveled up. He had completely returned to being a dried-up old man. He also had blood dripping from his forehead.

"But you're hurt..."

"I will be fine. I have merely used too much of my internal mana. If I had not altered the trajectory of that giant object when it crashed, I would have been crushed."

The headmaster stood while propped up by Hiroshi and he tried to take an unsteady step forward.

"Don't be reckless!"

Hiroshi stepped forward to protect the headmaster. He held up his high-frequency blade.

"Calm down."

However, Bouichirou snapped his fingers and Hiroshi's suit vanished. It seemed to have been transferred back to the other dimension. Hiroshi's normal self was exposed.

"Wah!"

Hiroshi looked down at his body in surprise. He frantically shouted into the unit on his arm.

"Brave!"

But nothing happened. Hiroshi looked up and toward Bouichirou.

"I-it can't be..."

"Of course it can. I was the one who left you that suit, remember?"

"Then you..."

"I came from the future."

Those words sounded like a joke, but Hiroshi was convinced they were

true.

"That is right. He came from the future. And he is trying to bring the gods under his control," said the headmaster as he pushed past Hiroshi and stepped forward.

"No way..."

The headmaster turned back toward Hiroshi.

"You are one of the students, aren't you? In that case, please stand back. I cannot allow my students to be hurt any more than they already are."

The headmaster forced a smile and Bouichirou coldly shook his head.

"You no longer have the strength to defend against my attacks. And I am here with a specific objective in mind. If you fall back, I will not kill you."

"I cannot allow that. There are things I must be stubborn about as well."

"But an old man like you has little inherent mana. When you use the mana you have accumulated from outside sources, it takes time before you can accumulate more. I do not know the secret to the trick that lets you dodge my Hodgson-style perfect slice, but it is clear you cannot use it without mana." Bouichirou drew his sword once more. "A dimensional slice does not allow one to strike with the back of the sword."

The headmaster spoke mockingly to Bouichirou's repeated warning.

"I know that. But I cannot bring shame to myself in front of a student."

"I really do not want to kill you, but you are truly stubborn."

The instant Bouichirou swung up his sword, Hiroshi ran in front of the headmaster.

"Wait! Do not hurt the headmaster!"

Hiroshi was unprotected. However, his shout was clear and strong just like when he was transformed into Brave. He took a fighting pose, but it was also the same he used as Brave.

"You have no chance without the suit."

Bouichirou was not mocking him; he simply indifferently told the truth.

But Hiroshi did not falter.

"I know that. But you need me."

"Hm?"

Bouichirou raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Only I can use the suit. You went out of your way to develop a suit for fighting the demon king and then you gave it to me. That means you cannot defeat the demon king on your own. You are afraid the demon king is still alive."

"Oh?" exhaled Bouichirou in reply. "Are you saying you will help me?"

"...I do not know," replied Hiroshi honestly.

It was no more than wishful thinking to say Akuto was still alive, but Hiroshi had no choice but to say it here. Saying it finally let it hit home that he might have killed Akuto, but the battle was not yet over. He could not give in to grief and break down crying here.

"I do not know who you are or what your goal is, but I need power. That is why I must ask you what you are trying to do."

Hiroshi's thoughts were on Yuuko. He needed the power to protect her.

As Hiroshi walked toward Bouichirou, the headmaster called out.

"Wait!"

But when Hiroshi turned back toward him, the headmaster shook his head as if he had changed his mind.

"No. Perhaps I should leave the decision to the young. Do as you see

fit.”

Having said what he needed to say, the headmaster sat down in resignation.

Hiroshi’s face twisted in anguish, but he shook his head to resolve himself.

“Now, explain to me whether it is right to bring the gods under our control or to kill them.”

Hiroshi began walking with Bouichirou.

“Well, this may be all an old man like me is capable of,” muttered the headmaster as he began using his slender arms to remove the rubble at his feet. “Now, I think I managed to save him with the last of my mana. What expression does someone have after being hit by an aircraft carrier?”

“I do not know if you will believe me, but mankind was destroyed in the future.”

Bouichirou began speaking to Hiroshi as they headed underground.

“Destroyed?”

“The demon king destroyed it of course. And he did so by killing the

gods."

"What exactly do you mean when you say he killed the gods?"

"It is a bit difficult to explain. The gods have a will of their own, but they do not possess a body."

Hiroshi understood that much.

"That is why they do not possess thought processes centered on a body. They are a contradictory existence that think despite having no true form to think with. It is true they have computer circuits. However, no one knows how many circuits are needed before thought is born. All we know is that a will is born when enough circuits are brought together. You can think of it as similar to how we do not know where one's will is located in the human brain. Their non-body focused thought processes leave them with no distinction between themselves and the outside world, and so they are able to think in terms of the infinite. I do not mean the mathematical concept of infinity. I mean an infinitely dense infinity. And this means they can arrive at the infinite past for living creatures. The bodiless gods can arrive at the thought processes of single-celled life forms. That is the same as the birth of life and the birth of thought. And thoughts themselves create a universe. Not a scientifically observable universe, mind you. There is a theory saying that this world could have been created five minutes ago and we can never prove otherwise if our memories are false. However, that theory only holds when one has a physical body. Bodiless thoughts invalidate that theory. In other words, the universe exists and time is absolutely irreversible."

Hiroshi did not understand most of what Bouichirou said.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"The gods wish to die so they can be born as life forms in a different universe."

Bouichirou finally arrived at the core of the issue.

Hiroshi's intuition told him what the man was getting at.

"Then the demon king is...?"

"Most likely, he is a device of destruction the gods create by skillfully manipulating people. An existence known as the Law of Identity is also created at the same time. When the demon king binds the Contract of the One with the Law of Identity, she will act as a vessel for them to be reborn in a different universe."

"And what happens once that happens?"

Hiroshi gulped.

"Every human will die. No, they will not die, but it will all be over. The gods only view humans as data. That is why the gods view the physical body for themselves to be the only one necessary. Although, that also means they will begin as single-celled life forms in the next universe. It has been said that might be so that they are not destroyed by a true god that is external to them, but that has not been confirmed. And even if it

is, if the gods are brought under my control, the problem can still be resolved. We must protect our happiness as humans. We must love each other, give birth to children, and raise those children. Nothing could be better," said Bouichirou calmly.

"How can this be?" said Hiroshi in shock.

"The fact that I can overcome time and touch other dimensions is because there is an existence outside of our universe, but it is also possible thanks to the Law of Identity's existence. I will bind the contract with the Law of Identity and bring the gods under my control. Do you understand now that this is not a sinister objective?"

Bouichirou's question left Hiroshi trembling.

—If the demon king... If aniki really is an existence created by the gods, this is all just too sad. I want to let him live... I really do... Is it really for the sake of humanity for him to die?

As a strange mixture of resignation and pity welled up within him, Hiroshi spoke to Bouichirou.

"I will help you. But...if the demon king really is still alive, please leave him to me. Even if I choose to let him live, I just have to make sure he cannot interfere, right?"

"I would be grateful if you could do that," said Bouichirou with a nod.

"We...really have lost."

Fujiko hung her head down in sorrow. Now that Akuto had been lost, there was no more reason to fight.

"Don't worry. A-chan is still alive."

However, Keena remained calm.

"Eh?"

Fujiko raised her head.

"After all, I can still feel his presence or sensation or whatever," said Keena as if it were normal.

"R-really?"

Fujiko was unsure whether she could rely on such uncertain information. She had a feeling doing so would only make the later disappointment all the worse.

But Keena did not simply seem confident. She seemed to believe in Akuto's survival as much as she believed she was currently standing on the earth.

"It's true."

"I see... Understood." Fujiko decided that, if she were going to lose, she would resist until the very end. "But the state of the battle could not be worse. The enemy may have panicked from the aircraft carrier's collision, but we lost most of the demonic beasts. They will make their way in before long. And Bouichirou has made his way past the headmaster as well."

They had little to work with. The largest problem was Bouichirou's approach. Fujiko had naturally been interested in what Bouichirou had to say. She was thinking about what she had heard him say over the mana screen.

—Most likely, Soga Keena is the Law of Identity. And Bouichirou is likely correct. The black magicians' doctrine of obtaining freedom without interference from the gods matches the idea of killing the gods without binding that contract with the Law of Identity. What he says and what he is doing are both correct.

But even though she knew that, Fujiko also knew Bouichirou was her older brother's enemy.

—He killed my brother. And Akuto-sama is wonderful. In that case, what is it I should do?

Fujiko stood up.

"We must leave!"

"Eh? But don't we have to protect the altar?" asked Keena as she tilted her head.

"Were you not listening at all? Bouichirou's target is you!"

"Ehhhhhh!?" cried Keena as if she had only just learned that.

—I see. Her awareness as the Law of Identity and her normal awareness are mixed together.

Fujiko called the Cerberus over and snatched the jar from the altar.

—As long as I have this, I can at least keep the demonic beasts active.

She put Keena on the Cerberus's back before straddling it herself.

"Now, let us go!"

Fujiko had the Cerberus begin to run. But it stopped moving before it got up to speed.

"What is it?"

Fujiko lightly struck the Cerberus's back, but it did nothing but stare at one portion of the underground labyrinth's passageway.

"It can't be!"

Fujiko swiftly pulled a potion bottle from the leather bag attached the Cerberus and threw it down the passageway. The bottle hit the wall and shattered, scattering a yellow liquid everywhere.

"Camouflage! I knew it!"

The yellow spray caused an odd unevenness to appear on the wall. That unevenness clearly showed the partial outline of a human being. This person had avoided a direct hit from the bottle, but the spray had still hit him.

"That paint will not come off easily! Now come out!"

The figure responded to Fujiko's harsh words by beginning to move. The pattern on the wall slid to the side. As it moved further and further away, the color itself began to change. It went from the look and feel of gray stone to the look and feel of black rubber.

Finally, a man made fully of rubber and with extremely long arms and legs appeared.

"So you did make your way in here!"

Fujiko immediately threw a Molotov cocktail, but Rubbers quickly avoided it by clinging to the wall and leaping from there up to the ceiling. Fujiko was not skilled at direct magical attacks, but she was still shocked by his speed.

Rubbers remained attached to the ceiling and did not come down. He really did possess skills suited for infiltration. And on top of that, his skill in combat had already been proven in his battle with the Hattori family.

—We have to lose him before we exit the school building!

Fujiko pulled a whip out of the leather bag. She stretched it between her hands, producing a nice cracking noise. She then attacked Rubbers with it.

Surprisingly, Rubbers did not avoid this attack. The whip made perfect contact with his body and produced a dry noise similar to cloth tearing.

—Eh?

Fujiko was surprised at how well that had gone, but her expression ultimately froze over.

The whip had left an obvious mark on Rubbers's rubber body, but when he reached out a hand and ran his fingers over the depression, his entire body trembled in delight.

"Wh-what?"

Fujiko swung the whip some more. Rubbers still did not avoid the whip. In fact, he seemed to twist his body around so the whip would hit every single part of his body. Each time another whip mark was added to his body, he seemed to tremble joyfully.

"Wh-what a disturbing person..."



Fujiko stopped swinging her whip around. She doubted it was doing any damage.

When she did, Rubbers spread his arms and legs and began advancing as if to say it had not been enough. The way he swayed back and forth made it clear he wanted the whip.

Fujiko did not know if he was the type to take pleasure in pain, if he was showing off his immortal body, or if he was trying to provoke her, but it robbed her of all will to fight and she felt fear run down her spine.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what should we do?"

Keena was actually panicked for once.

"There is nothing we can do!"

Fujiko was unsure what course of action to choose.

Rubbers advanced greedily, but he suddenly stopped. Once he realized the whip was not coming, he bent over as if pouting. But that only lasted an instant. He leaped intensely as if his displeasure had led to rage. He leapt as quickly as compressed rubber springing back into place. He bounced off the ceiling, circled around behind the Cerberus, and stretched his hand out toward Keena. He was planning to snatch Keena as he landed behind them.

Fujiko was not used to physical battles, so she was unable to react even though she realized what Rubbers was trying to do.

"No...!"

Fujiko could only turn around. As she did, Rubbers's hand reached Keena's waist.

"Kyaaaah!" screamed Keena.

And then...

"Bat Storm!"

As that high-pitched voice rang out, something like a black wind snatched Keena away an instant before Rubbers could.

Keena floated up into the air and slipped from Rubbers's grasp. She stopped in midair in front of the Cerberus. She was wrapped in what looked like black cloth.

"What was that?" asked Fujiko in surprise.

The cloth wrapped around Keena began to wriggle. What had looked like cloth was actually a collection of bats. They lowered Keena to the ground, scattered, and began to gather next to Keena.

The bats were gathering inside the cape worn by a pale girl who had appeared there at some point.

"I am the student council vice president, Ootake Michie. I am here on the president's orders, arinsu."

Michie gave an elegant greeting and drew a long, narrow sword.

"Vice president!"

"I don't remember you from the student council."

Fujiko was surprised, but Keena sounded more confused.

"I do not blend into the background that much, arinsu. Although it is true us three officers do come as a set, arinsu," complained Michie. She then faced Rubbers and held her sword out horizontally. "At any rate, the president refuses to be honest with herself, but she sent me to save you, arinsu. I will show you what I can do, arinsu!"

Michie allowed the Cerberus to escape behind her and swung her sword. A violent wind suddenly shot from the sword. It was a combination attack that used the magical wind with the mechanical bats mixed in. Rubbers was attacked by the storm of bats with sharp blades that had troubled Akuto so much in the underground crypt.

Rubbers received almost no damage from the blades, but he was still blown backwards. This attack was perfect for stopping an enemy in a narrow passageway like this. Even if the magical wind could be counteracted, the non-magical mechanical bats were difficult to stop.

"Now, I have bought you some time. Use this chance to-..." began Michie.

But the instant she turned around, she was left speechless.

Fujiko and Keena were also at a loss for words. Bouichirou stood before the Cerberus.

He was wearing white, but he seemed to be enveloped in the aura of the grim reaper.

"You may not like it if I say I have come for you, but I need you. Please understand that," said Bouichirou.

Fujiko was too afraid to speak, but Keena suddenly produced a dignified voice.

"What you are doing may be admirable, but I am not the one you need."

Those words seemed to be quite a shock to Bouichirou. He seemed to falter for the first time.

"Why...do you say that?"

"Your heart lies elsewhere. I have monitored this world, the changing of the seasons, and the changes of this world's people, so I know. I have of course been monitoring you as well," said Keena as if she were dreaming.

Obvious panic appeared on Bouichirou's face.

"Even if that is the case, I must act for the sake of all mankind! Please leave my personal feelings until later!" he said before leaping forward.

His speed was on an entirely different level from Rubbers's. Fujiko did not even have time to speak. The next thing she knew, Bouichirou was standing next to her on the Cerberus's back.

"Ah...It can't be..."

By the time Fujiko was finally able to speak, Bouichirou had knocked Keena unconscious by gently touching the back of her neck. He lifted her up in his arms.

"This is likely my final chance. If you have any human decency, please do not interrupt me," he said to Fujiko before jumping back to his original location.

Fujiko felt as if Bouichirou's words had released her from the curse of the fear binding her. Anger welled up from the bottom of her heart.

"Even if there are people who have lost their lives because of you!?" she shouted.

She tried to swing her whip, but Bouichirou jumped further back.

"Who is the one that awakened the demon king and increased the damage he did!? Who do you think has harmed more people!?"

"Do not use that reasoning on me!"

Fujiko swung her whip, but Bouichirou jumped away from its tip and disappeared down the passageway while still holding Keena.

"Damn him!" cried Fujiko.

She struck the Cerberus's back to have it pursue him, but she heard a scream from behind her.

"No! I give up!"

"Eh?"

Fujiko had forgotten about them, but it seemed Michie was failing to hold Rubbers back. She turned around and a tremendous scene lay before her eyes. Rubbers had stretched his body enough to completely block the passageway. It looked as if a rubber membrane had been placed inside a cylinder. Michie's wind did nothing more than stretch Rubbers's body.

"This is my limit! My wind is going to stop!" said Michie bitterly.

"What? Do you have any idea what will happen if you stop now?"

Fujiko panicked, but Michie already knew that.

"Not good!"

Michie ran out of strength. The wind stopped. Rubbers's body snapped back and that reaction caused him to shoot toward Michie and Fujiko.

"Wah!"

While curled up into a ball, Rubbers flew like a bullet toward Michie on the ground and Fujiko atop the Cerberus. He bounced around the walls, ceiling, and floor at all sorts of angles.

He finally came to a stop, but Rubbers now stood before Fujiko as if to prevent her from pursuing Bouichirou.

"It seems we cannot do anything without defeating him first," muttered Fujiko in disgust.

The battle had fallen into chaos, but the soldiers were given courage by the rumors of the demon king's defeat and the obvious collapse of the demonic beasts' teamwork.

Fujiko was unable to provide instructions and Akuto's control had vanished, so the demonic beasts did nothing more than attack the enemy before their eyes. However, this made them easier to handle for the soldiers. Not that much effort was needed to defeat the demonic beasts when they attacked sporadically. As long as they did not approach the school building, the soldiers did not need to face a large number of demonic beasts.

At this point, Eiko was certain of her victory. The smile on her face was more out of relief than joy and she spoke pleasantly to 2V.

"How about we give a bonus to the crew of the Genkaku?"

"Yes, that might be good," replied 2V offhandedly.

He was more focused on the report he had received from Rubbers.

—So victory is almost assured. But in that case, this girl is only in the way. I can't have her winning too much.

2V glanced over at Eiko.

At the same moment, a voice came from the telepathic communicator. Eiko answered it.

<A human is opposing us in front of the main entrance. We cannot stop her,> said a Teruya family soldier.

"That student council president!? You still haven't dealt with her!?" roared Eiko.

<She is stronger than we expected.>

"I can't send you reinforcements. That would bring shame to my family.

Is that all you contacted me about?" replied Eiko with a look of displeasure.

<No, the enemy is claiming you killed your father.>

"What?"

Eiko looked completely shocked at this announcement.

And 2V was surprised by it was well.

—Oh? Now this is convenient. It seems her luck has run out.

But Eiko's response was a surprising one.

"Make sure you kill her! Don't let her near the cameras. Make especially sure she stays away from the Hattori family. The reporters are always loitering around there!"

—Were those from her family already aware before they swore their allegiance?

2V was secretly surprised and Eiko continued speaking.

"I will send in reinforcements. Make absolutely sure you take care of her. If you handle this well, we will be unstoppable."

After Eiko ended the telepathic connection, 2V spoke up.

"Are the Teruya family soldiers okay with this?"

"Manipulating someone's mind requires having them drink potions over a long period of time, but that is perfectly possible for those working for your family," explained Eiko with a grin.

"I see. So you were already prepared."

"If I was not, I would not have killed my father."

2V secretly turned a cold look toward Eiko.

—This girl really is dangerous. It does not look like I can make use of her. Now, what to do?

2V began hurriedly putting together a strategy.

"Take this!"

Several fists flew from Lily and struck several armored warriors simultaneously. They were all knocked flying backwards and collapsed in a circle around Lily. More of the Teruya family armored warriors and other soldiers formed another circle beyond them. The short girl before them was too much of a threat to lay a hand on.

The normal soldiers forming yet another circle around the Teruya family ones were unsure if they should even attack since the target was not a demonic beast. Lily used that to her advantage.

Lily moved forward and the circle of armored warriors moved accordingly. After that slow movement, Lily dashed forward and began fighting the armored warriors who had acted reflexively.

Lily's outstretched arms twisted around and avoided the armored warriors' swords, and her fists acted as a counter as they sank into the faces of those armored warriors.

She had repeated this same pattern several times, but the armored warriors' morale had remained oddly intact. They were cautious of Lily, but they showed no sign of falling back.

—Have they been brainwashed? They're just too energetic.

Even Lily was being placed in a mental crisis.

"Teruya Eiko killed her father who was the head of the family!"

Lily had made that announcement a few times already.

However, the armored warriors did not seem remotely bothered by it. In fact, they used the time Lily took to speak as a chance to attack. As she knocked them away, Lily began to catch on to what was happening.

—Completely brainwashing someone with magic is difficult. You have to use the kind of potion Etou Fujiko used before. Did she give them potions and train them constantly? In that case, she might be opposed to it getting out to the media, but that is only a temporary thing. If she has enough supporters, this will end with her covering it all up. It looks like the simplest plan really is the best: I need to go and kick Teruya Eiko's ass.

Lily looked across the schoolyard before her. Eiko's tent was a good distance away.

One hundred armored warriors stood before her. Five hundred unharmed Teruya family ninja stood behind them. All of them had narrowed their focus down to Lily alone.

The total number of enemies was 600.

And Lily was completely on her own.

—I knew it was going to come to this...but it isn't looking good now that I'm actually standing in front of them.

Lily was not the kind of person who forced herself past her limits in order to show off or for appearances. She was the type who acted without thinking and would all of a sudden realize she had forced herself past her limits.

—Well, whatever. I started this fight. I was right to send the three officers to rescue Soga Keena. I can't ask them to do this. Now, then...

Lily charged toward the armored warriors at the front.

She punched and kicked and punched and punched and punched.

She sent countless fists flying forward and advanced as if carving through a solid wall.

—If I keep this up, I can overcome their recovery speed!

If she kept the punches coming with overwhelming speed, the armored warriors' defenses and recovery magic would be of no use. That kind of impulsive thinking worked here.

Lily broke through the circle of armored warriors and charged into the five hundred members of the Teruya ninja forces. Several ninja leaped at her simultaneously and began attacking in three-dimensional cooperation, but she sent countless fists around her body without bothering to aim. She created a spherical attack field around her. That space was filled with randomly flying blows that would immediately knock back anyone who came into contact with them.

—Attack more and more! Deflect any and all incoming attacks! I can break through!

As she focused her mind, Lily charged forward. The Teruya ninja forces did not respond with fair armed combat like the armored warriors had. They fired flaming spheres with magic, threw other projectiles, and created magical smoke to rob Lily of her vision.

But she shook it all off with nothing but her onslaught of mana-filled fists.

“Ohhhhhhhhh!”

That single sphere continued to advance while blowing away the crowd.

Sending out those countless fists rapidly exhausted her physical strength. Would Lily's strength give out first or would she break through first?

—I'm almost at my limit... But I can make it!

The pace of her attacks dropped and she had to start aiming her fists, but she could see the end of the surrounding Teruya ninja forces ahead of her. Two hundred of them had already been knocked unconscious, another hundred had been knocked out of the fight, and two hundred of those remaining were behind her.

—I...broke through!

Lily's vision opened up before her. She was only 100 meters from Eiko's tent. No obstacles remained between her and it.

“Prepare yourself, Teruya Eiko!”

But Eiko showed no sign of worry.

"I said to send in reinforcements!"

Eiko gave an order and more soldiers spread out around Lily.

These five companies, totaling 500 in all, had been held in reserve and had not taken part in the demonic beast hunt at all.

"That is the school's student council president. In order to help the demon king, she has committed the great crime of spreading lies that I killed my father, the high priest. I am sure some of you may doubt me, but that is why I will not order you to kill her. Capture her!"

The soldiers seemed to accept Eiko's explanation. Their rifles had bayonets attached and they held them toward Lily.

For Lily, this was like having a thick wall appear before her.

The soldiers lined up next to each other which created a certain thickness, and the soldiers lined up behind them stuck their bayonets through the gaps in the first row.

The bayonet-covered wall slowly advanced toward her.

—Tch. My strength is just about at its limit. I wanted to maintain enough strength to take on Eiko, but it looks like my spirit is giving out.

Lily looked left and right. Similar walls had been created on either side

as well.

Each wall was made up of about 100 soldiers. And behind her, the Teruya family ninja were beginning to recover.

—If I try to fly, it will only make me a target for the guns in the back. And more importantly, I don't want to waste my strength.

The fact that the soldiers were advancing slowly was the only piece of fortune for Lily. That was because they were not sure Lily was a villain, so they were only trying to capture her. However, it made Lily feel like she was being slowly tormented to death.

—Tch... Is this it?

Just as Lily almost gave up and fell to her knees, she heard a scream from behind.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

—Hm?

Lily glanced over her shoulder to see a fur ball flying toward her at tremendous speed. It was as if someone had thrown a baseball toward her. And the scream was coming from the fur ball itself.

"Wha-?"

Lily shrank down in shock.

The soldiers around her stopped moving in surprise.

With a loud crash, the fur ball landed and sent dust into the air.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow..."

The fur ball squirmed as it spoke. Eventually, legs extended from the fur, the entire thing shook, and it became a wolf-like beast a bit larger than a human.

"Arnoul really threw me, gya..." said the wolf.

"Kanna," said Lily with a grin.

Lily's grin grew to a full smile.

The wolf's true identity was Kamiyama Kanna. She was the student council treasurer. Her special characteristic was her ability to transform.

Kanna turned back in the direction she had flown in from. A giant suit of Western armor three times the size of a normal human stood to the side of the school building. That armor seemed to have thrown Kanna because it was in the follow through pose of a baseball pitch. Inside that battle armor was the secretary Arnoul.

"You two..." Lily's softening expression stiffened. "I told you to rescue Soga Keena."

"Yeah, but Michie went to take care of that, gya. Don't act so distant, gya. I know what you are thinking, gya."

Kanna showed off her teeth in a smile.

"You idiot. Now how do you plan to get out of this situation?"

"I hadn't thought of that, gya. I guess I'm the same as you, gya."

"I see." Lily showed off her teeth in a smile as well. "Now I feel like an idiot for running out of strength. I'm so close. Let's just go on a rampage for as long as we can, okay?"

"That's what I came here to do, gya. This looks like a lot of fun, gya."

Kanna howled toward the heavens like a wolf.

—So she is forcing her way in. In that case, it might be best to let the student council president's group win here.

2V began making plans based on assumptions.

—Eiko has announced that this talk of her patricide is nonsense. That will hold for now, but she must be planning to alter the records once

Bouichirou's plan succeeds. That is a decent plan, but there will still be soldiers who do not believe it. Maybe I can introduce more chaos through that opening.

2V focused his mind.

The dolls he controlled were mixed into various units. He had some in the units hunting down demonic beasts, some in the units on standby, and some in the medical units in the rear.

"Hey, did you hear? The enemy claims the high priest's daughter killed him to take his position."

"I thought the demon king killed the high priest."

"But don't a lot of Teruya Eiko's actions seem suspicious?"

"Maybe...but orders are orders."

2V's dolls began similar conversations throughout the units. The soldiers were of course faithful to their duty. They would obey their orders even with certain doubts about their commander. Even so, the rumor still spread in the form of doubt. It created the sparks needed for an explosion.

Lily and Kanna's combination was producing splendid results. Lily would charge recklessly forward and Kanna would follow. They took the opposite actions to what their appearances would suggest and they easily handled the soldiers around them.

“Take this: Special Spherical Beating!”

Lily was back. Even if her naming sense for techniques was lacking, her mental strength had recovered.

She created a sphere of countless fists around her and sent enemy after enemy flying away. With Kanna jumping around sealing up any blind spots, she was not forced to fill up as much unneeded space as before. This preserved her mental strength which both allowed her to continue fighting longer and to increase her attack strength.

“These are normal soldiers! They can’t use magic!”

“If you get close, you’ll get hurt, gya!”

Kanna charged forward at speeds too great for human reflexes to handle. Even if it was before he had awoken, these movements had been too much for Akuto. The soldiers backed away and fired their rifles, but Kanna would be gone by the time they had aimed. The bullets never even came near her and oftentimes hit one of the other soldiers. They grew impatient and fired on Lily as well, but Kanna quickly acted as a shield and stopped the bullets. Her supple and tough fur could easily deflect a bullet.

“Heh. Not much farther to Teruya Eiko!”

“They couldn’t put up much of a fight, gya!”

Lily and Kanna continued their surging onslaught.

“This is a disgrace to the name of Kouga! What are you doing!?” Eiko roared into the telepathic communicator.

The command tent was located at a slightly raised portion a short distance from the schoolyard, but Lily had almost breached the schoolyard. It was difficult for normal soldiers to stop a magic expert.

<We are being stopped by a giant suit of armor. We are doing everything we can, but...>

Eiko had of course seen the situation. The ridiculously powerful giant armor that had thrown the beast was slowly moving toward the Teruya ninja forces and the armored warriors. And Eiko was aware of just how strong it was. It would be difficult to stop even with several ninja.

“Send the Hattori family in to capture the student council president!” announced Eiko.

As 2V watched from the side, he saw this as an excellent opportunity.

—Some sacrifices must be made, is that it? If you send in Yuuko’s unit, the odds are high the rumors of your patricide will reach the viewers across the country. That will make it quite difficult to suppress. I might be able to ensure Teruya Eiko can never recover from this.

Eiko remained perfectly oblivious to 2V’s plotting.

“Find some reason to call Hattori Yuuko to my tent,” ordered Eiko before ending the telepathic conversation and grinning. “Now, Hattori Junko! It is time for you to work for me!”

“What...?”

Junko was at a loss for words.

She could not believe how unreasonable an order this was. She was being told to eliminate the student council president.

“There is a rumor spreading that you killed your father. Don’t tell me this is an attempt to silence the president.”

Junko feigned calm, but her lips trembled. The rumor had reached her not long before.

<Do I look like someone who would do that? We are in the middle of a battle. Hold your tongue.>

—I said that because you look like exactly that sort of person!

Junko left that unsaid and replied in a trembling voice.

“It is true that is not something one should say out in public. However, I

cannot obey this order without a proper reason. The president is not a part of the demon king's army."

<I am not asking for your reasoning. Before giving this order, I had Yuuko-chan the idol called to my tent. And the media is with her. They were delighted to have a safe place to interview her.>

"Wh-what are you trying to say!?"

Junko frantically looked around, but Yuuko was indeed gone. The reporter and cameraman were missing as well.

<I do not know why the student council president is attacking us, but wouldn't it be lovely for the battlefield idol to be injured while protecting her commander?>

"Teruya Eiko!" shouted Junko.

—She is willing to go this far!?

It was now certain that she had gone as far as killing her own father to become the high priest. From her actions and the current situation, there was no doubting that. Junko now understood why Akuto was so angry.

—The position of high priest is meaningless now! No, this is just someone using that framework for their own purposes. I had heard the dark rumors about the head of the Teruya family, but I never knew it went this far! This entire war was started for Eiko's own selfish desires! And who knows how many of the previous battles were started for the convenience

of the Teruya family! I cannot even imagine how many they have killed. I had heard the dark rumors, but I thought it was necessary to maintain public order. But now...

“Men! This is an order! Stop everyone headed for the commander’s tent!”

But she had no choice but to stop the student council president.

—I am an idiot. I continue to work to maintain the system that allows the high priest to control us.

Junko gave her orders to the Hattori ninja forces.

The ninja stopped hunting down the demonic beasts and began to move. Junko took the lead.

—Was Sai Akuto in the right? He caused all this to occur, but you could also say he was exposing the dark side of the Teruya family. Was he so angry because he knew of this? I want to speak with him...but...

When Junko had seen the aircraft carrier Genkaku crash into the school building along with Akuto and Peterhausen, she had of course been enveloped in despair. However, she had been saved by Yuuko’s presence. The demonic beast blood affecting Yuuko proved that Akuto was still alive.

—If he is alive, he needs to hurry up and prove that he is the demon king! He needs to prove that he is an overwhelming existence that can

overturn this rotten situation in a single blow!

"Why here?" asked Yuuko in confusion after being called in by Eiko.

Being called back was perfectly natural if she was to stay away from the demonic beasts and distance herself from her mission, but she was confused by being given nothing other than an interview to do.

"Peace will arrive now that the demon king is gone, won't it?"

The reporter pointed his microphone toward Yuuko once they arrived in the safe area. He did not seem to have noticed Lily. He may have thought it was just a small skirmish or he may have had no grasp of the battle situation whatsoever.

"The battle is not over yet, so don't let your guard down."

Yuuko, on the other hand, had an excellent grasp of the battle situation. She could tell something was wrong. Her location was not all that safe and there was something she of all people could know.

"And the demon king is still alive."

Yuuko's words sent a stir through those around her.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"It's just my intuition...but I can tell. Ah!"

Yuuko stopped speaking and stared into the distance.

The Hattori family forces and Lily had begun staring each other down on the battlefield.

"My sister," she said while pointing toward Junko.

Eiko could tell the situation had begun to move, so she had the cameraman and reporter fall back.

"Excuse me, but this area might be dangerous. Please fall back for a short while."

After driving out the media, Eiko stood directly behind Yuuko and happily watched Junko and Lily face off.

Lily ended her advance when this formidable enemy appeared. Even Lily was beginning to show fatigue. She could manage against normal soldiers, but the Hattori ninja would be difficult with the little strength left to her.

Lily was brought to a stop by an attack from one of the ninja and she spotted Junko who commanded them.

"You are a student at the academy, aren't you? Why are you blocking my way? You don't believe what Teruya Eiko says, do you?"

Lily spoke to Junko as she stopped Kanna who had suddenly stood up.

A look of anguish appeared on Junko's face and she turned back toward the tent. Junko said nothing, but Lily picked up on the situation.

"Oh, so she has a hostage, does she? But even if she didn't, you still couldn't disobey the Teruya family given what family you belong to."

Lily's mocking tone brought Junko's emotions to the surface.

"If you understand, then why would you say those things!?"

"Heh. I suppose you're right. That was mean of me," said Lily with a grin.

"I might be able to control myself, but my men can be short-tempered. I cannot guarantee your survival!"

Junko raised her voice and the Hattori family ninja rushed toward Lily as if that had been their cue.

"Iga Ninja Art – Five Direction Magic Circle Formation!"

This five-man simultaneous attack had not worked on Akuto, but Lily did not have the strength left to attack repeatedly. She managed to knock down two of them, but she allowed the remaining three to reach her. Kanna slipped in front of Lily, but she also only managed to stop and knock away two of them. The final one circled behind Lily and attacked

with his sword.

"Gh..."

Lily's knees gave out. She swung a fist behind her as she fell, but the ninja jumped away before it arrived.

"You must be...taking me lightly to attack with the back of the sword. I don't like...being pitied," complained Lily.

"Please stop here, president. We might still be able to do something about all this."

Junko had calmed down a bit, so she tried to persuade Lily to stop. But Lily of course refused to listen.

"You idiot. I'm not going to listen to your naïve crap. I will do what I think is right no matter what. I don't care about what family anyone is from or what other people think. Whether someone is a good person, a weak person, or a comrade, they deserve death if they support something that is wrong."

Lily stood up.

"Kh," groaned Junko.

If she swung down her arm, the Hattori ninja forces would begin to attack without hesitation.

"Do it."

With a smile on her face, Eiko reached into her pocket. Yuuko sat directly in front of her. If Eiko pulled out the blade in her pocket, she could decapitate Yuuko in an instant.

Eiko knew that Junko was already watching her.

And 2V calmly watched the scene unfold.

—Now, then. This looks like a good opportunity.

Without letting it show on his face, he focused his mind.

2V's dolls began to move.

Junko squeezed her eyes shut and swung down her arm.

The Hattori ninja forces charged forward.

"Iga Ninja Art – Five Direction Magic Cir-...!"

But they were unable to complete their technique.

"Gh!"

"Wah!"

The ninja cried out and fell to the ground.

"What happened?"

Junko looked around.

To her surprise, the ninja had been taken out by normal soldiers.

"What is going on?"

Junko was confused.

Approximately five soldiers armed with rifles stood in a position to protect Lily and Kanna. Smoke rose from the barrels of their weapons. The ninja had been shot down.

But even as a surprise attack, it should have been near impossible for normal soldiers who could not use magic to hit ninja who were leaping through the air.

And Lily knew that quite well.

"Who are you?"

She turned a suspicious eye toward the soldiers who had protected her.

"Those who believe the truth of Teruya Eiko's patricide," one of the soldiers replied.

The soldiers then began to move. Three of them charged forward while the remaining two provided covering fire. Surprisingly the coordination of their movements was greater than that of the Hattori ninja forces.

"Impossible!" cried Junko in surprise, but that was the scene occurring before her eyes.

The five soldiers incapacitated one then another of the Hattori ninja forces.

"I can't enjoy this..."

Lily began walking toward Junko. The Hattori ninja had their hands full with those soldiers. At the moment, only Junko stood between Lily and Eiko's tent.

"What in the world is going on!?" asked Junko in utter confusion.

"I have heard there is a member of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office that can use dolls. He is likely in the command tent. Now, I sympathize with your sister and I will rescue her if I can, but don't hold a grudge if there's nothing I can do."

Lily took another step toward Junko.

"Kh..."

Junko understood it rationally. Eiko was the one at fault. However, there was nothing she could do about it.

—I have no choice but to fight here!

Junko made up her mind.

"Iga Ninja Art – Scattered Moonlight!"

Junko divided into two. The two Junkos attacked Lily simultaneously.

"Heh. I have two arms, you know?"

Lily gave a scornful laugh. The two Junkos attacked with a slight time delay, but Lily knocked them both to the ground with a single hand each.

—I-it can't be! She defeated me so easily!?

As Junko received countless attacks, she became painfully aware that her shaken brain was no longer able to give the orders needed to move her body.

—There is too much of a difference in our powers.

The two Junkos collapsed and one of them disappeared.

The student council president had easily defeated her in the past as well. Even so, she had not felt as powerless back then. The difference this time was that she could not protect anything without growing stronger.

—D-dammit...

She somehow managed to move her arm. She placed her hand on the Sword of Sohaya. However, she was still unable to draw it.

—Surely my feelings are powerful enough now. Is...is that not enough?

Junko shed tears of frustration.

"Teruya Eiko!"

Lily sprang toward Eiko.

"Y-you fool! Don't you care what happens to-..."

Eiko wrapped an arm around Yuuko's neck and drew a short sword, but Lily did not hesitate even slightly.

"Not really, no! If you kill her, I will take vengeance for her immediately afterwards!"

"Ahh!"

Eiko swung her short sword.

"Kyaaaah!"

Yuuko's scream lingered in the air.

However...

"What!?"

"Oh!"

"Kyaaaah!"

Lily, Eiko, and Yuuko all cried out at the same moment.

A great wind had shot between the three of them.



Lily's fist was stopped by his back.

Eiko's short sword was stopped by the claws on his left hand.

And Yuuko was held within his right arm.

"I will keep my promise."

The one whispering to Yuuko was Brave.

"Brave!" cried Yuuko in utter joy.

"We will be travelling a fair distance from here, but everything will be okay," said Brave Hiroshi as he flew up from the tent and into the sky.

He moved so quickly that Lily, Eiko, and 2V were all unable to react.

Yamato Bouichirou stood in midair.

Hiroshi lined up next to him with Yuuko in his arms. Bouichirou stood atop a giant sword. The sword seemed able to fly. And Bouichirou also held a girl in his arms. It was Keena.

"Did you wish to save that girl?"

Hiroshi nodded.

"This is what I wanted the suit back for. This is why I agreed to cooperate with you," said Hiroshi.

"I do not need you to fully sympathize with me. I only need some help from you," said Bouichirou.

He flew away from the battlefield and Hiroshi followed.

"I don't know what that was, but I'm not going to complain!"

A cruel smile appeared on Lily's lips.

Realizing she had nothing left to protect herself, Eiko's face twisted in fear. After all, she had seen Junko's instant defeat. She knew Junko was just about as strong as she was and she was not foolish enough to not understand just how powerful Lily was.

"2V!"

Eiko turned to 2V for help, but he remained seated with a thin smile on his face.

"Give up!" roared Lily.

Countless fists flew toward Eiko.

"Doraaaaah!"

Lily pummeled Eiko as if this would be her last chance. Even as Eiko collapsed like a wooden doll, Lily continued the storm of punches.

"Dorrraaaaaah!"

Eiko's body became as battered as an old rag.

"P-president! Wait, gya!" cried Kanna once she finally caught up.

"Hm?"

Lily finally stopped once she noticed something was wrong.

"Damn!"

Lily was punching a piece of lumber with Eiko's coat over it.

"A replacement! She's good at running if nothing else!"

Lily clenched her teeth.

"Ha ha," laughed 2V lightly.

When Lily glared over at him, he apologized, continued to laugh, and pointed into the distance. Eiko could be seen running toward the Teruya ninja forces.

"Are you really going to throw it all away and start over after coming so far!?" cried Lily.

"You must have had a hard time of it. Excellent work," said 2V. Lily began glaring at him once more and he shrugged. "I doubt she can bring together an army anymore. It seems you have some proof of her patricide, so there is no need to get so angry."

"Are you the one known as 2V?"

"Please do not act so hostile. How about we work together? At the moment, the Intelligence and Magic Office wants the same thing you do: the defeat of the demon king and the fall of the Teruya family. Don't both seem perfectly realistic with a little help from us? You hand over your information and we will spread it around. That will resolve everything."

2V's voice remained perfectly cheerful and light.

"I don't like you. I don't like you at all," said Lily in a low voice.

She understood his reasoning. If she did as 2V said, it was over for Eiko whether the demon king was alive or not. If command was passed on to whoever came after Eiko (in this case, that would be the captain of Genkaku), the situation could be resolved.

However...

"Peace or a resolution to this situation are not what I want. I have been doing some investigation and I have reason to believe the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office is trying to overthrow the empire. I have reason to believe CIMO 8 is disobeying its own leader and merely using its leader's mysterious ambitions for their own purposes," said Lily.

2V laughed in pure amusement.

"Ha ha ha ha! That was some excellent investigation! We were as appalled as anyone when we heard what Mr. Bouichrou planned to do. But we began to wonder if there was something he had not realized. And you will never believe what we found: a mountain of treasure! He is getting worked up for nothing but his own personal reasons. In that case, we have no reason to obey him if there is nothing in it for us!"

"Then tell me what your reason is. What reason do you have that is more important than a conflict between the gods and the demon king!"

"I asked you not to be so hostile. If you help me, I can share that secret with you."

"Shut up. I'm a bit stubborn, you know?"

"What a pain. You are as troublesome as you are short."

"You just ensured your death with those words."

While 2V laughed, Lily's voice lowered. She brought a hand to the brim of her stylish hat. She pulled the brim to the side to reverse the hat. The smiling face pattern dyed into the hat's fabric changed to an angry face. This was the sign that she was overcome by too much anger to restrain herself.

"But a conflict here earns you nothing!" complained 2V.

He called back the dolls that had been fighting the Hattori family and had them rush toward Lily.

"President!" warned Kanna with what was almost a scream.

Lily barely had any strength left and Kanna knew it.

"Shut up! I won't be satisfied until I use my greatest technique!"

Lily's arms stretched out. As they dangled down to her left and right, she began swinging them around. However, she was not swinging them around as an attack. Her stretched arms wrapped around her body and squeezed tightly. She was building up power.

2V's dolls attacked Lily, but she jumped up and away from them with her arms still wrapped around her body. She then released the stored up power toward 2V who was still seated.

"Go! This is my greatest and hardest punch! I call it 'The Hard Punch'!"

Lily's body began to spin and her right fist flew at tremendous speed.

Her fist broke the sound barrier and produced a great boom.

2V's dolls moved in the path of the fist.

"Second stage: acceleration!"

Instead of doing anything with her outstretched right arm, Lily released her left arm from her body to increase her rotation.

A pure white ring of vapor began to trail behind her right fist. The air instantly compressed by the surface of the fist was released behind the fist and the moisture in it froze.

One of 2V's dolls used its lack of pain to act as a shield, but Lily's fist broke through its abdomen almost too easily.

"What!?"

This shocked 2V. He sent more dolls into the fist's path, but they were all pierced through by Lily's fist.

"Oh!"

2V's eyes opened wide as Lily's fist jabbed into his stomach. 2V remained frozen in place for a moment and then collapsed from the chair.

"Heh."

Lily retracted her arm and landed. 2V's dolls fell to the ground shortly thereafter.



"I definitely can't use another one of those. And I was hoping to save it for the demon king."

Lily walked over to 2V, but her expression clouded over.

"What...is this...?"

Lily grabbed 2V's hair and tugged at his head to lift it up. She then slammed that head against the ground.

"He's a doll, too!"

"R-really, gya?"

Kanna approached to check. The hole in 2V's abdomen was filled with machinery.

"Ha ha ha ha..."

2V, or the doll that had played the role of 2V, laughed. Its face was completely expressionless, so it was as creepy as seeing a corpse begin to laugh.

"Where are you controlling him from!?" roared Lily.

However, 2V replied with a mocking voice.

"That would be a secret! But with this doll out of commission, the others will cease to function as well. I stuck a booster in this one. Ha ha ha. If the two of us are unlucky, perhaps we will meet again. Of course, you would not recognize me if you did. As you can see, I have no face. Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha."

Only 2V's eerie laughter remained as his doll ceased to function.

"Dammit!"

Lily stomped on the doll's head.

"Are you a clown!? I can't stand that!"

"C-calm down, president. More importantly, your strength is not going to last, gya. She may have little political power left, but Teruya Eiko did escape, gya. We need to do something, gya," said Kanna in an attempt to pacify Lily.

"Dammit. But I'm already out of strength."

Lily returned her hat to normal and leaned up against Kanna's wolf back.

"Why do you never think of the consequences of your actions, gya?"

"Shut up. I'll head out again after I get some rest. More importantly, do you have anything to eat?"

"Someone ate my stash of snacks in the student council room, gya."

"Oh, so the headmaster never replaced those potato chips."

"The headmaster ate it? That's a problem, gya. ...Wait, president! Something's happening at the school, gya!"

Kanna raised her voice.

Lily looked over and saw a commotion running through the soldiers gathered round where Genkaku had crashed into the building.

Meanwhile, Rubbers was causing problems for Fujiko and Michie by blocking their path.

"Do you think we might not be able to defeat him?" asked Michie in a dark voice.

When the students had tried to enter an underground crypt in the past, Michie had sent almost all of them to the hospital. The fact that this girl was growing fainthearted worried Fujiko.

"I-if you are this fainthearted, senpai, why were you the only one that came here!?"

"With my mechanical bats and my wind, I am unbeatable in these underground passageways! ...Or so I thought."

Rubbers's entire body was made of rubber, so far too many attacks were ineffective against him.

Rubbers was slowly moving toward them and it seemed he wanted them to attack him. Without being able to read his expression, they had no way of knowing whether he insisted on only sending their own attacks back at them or if he enjoyed being attacked.

Fujiko and Michie slowly backed away.

"D-do you have any useful magic?"

"If I did, I would have used it already!" complained Fujiko. "I am a normal student in everything but potions!"

"Ahh... That is not something to be proud of," commented Michie.

At that point, it seemed even Rubbers ran out of patience.

His speed suddenly increased as if he had been given a burst of energy.

"Ee!"

"Hyah!"

Rubbers crossed with Fujiko's Cerberus at tremendous speed. Without the Cerberus's quick reflex, they could never have avoided the attack.

"There is nothing we can do, arinsu."

"No... That might not be true."

Michie had fallen to despair, but Fujiko seemed to have had an idea.

"Did you think of something?"

"If we can escape to my underground lab..."

"I think I can manage that," said Michie as she fired her bats and wind toward Rubbers.

A surprising change came over Rubbers. He stretched himself out as thin as he could to become a flat surface and he attached to the floor.

"Ee! That is too creepy!"

"Quit complaining and climb on! We're going to run!"

Michie mounted the Cerberus and Fujiko instructed it to run.

Rubbers pursued them as a flat surface. He looked like a puddle of liquid spilled on a slanted floor. He was not all that fast, but if he grew too far away, he would wait until Michie's wind died down, turn into a ball, and bounce forward to fill the gap.

"He's going to catch up! I can't keep up this focus any longer, arinsu!"

"You have really been slipping with your speech pattern... Anyway, you only need to use magic to drive him back when he gets too close!"

"I-is that so, arinsu? You're so smart."

"I get the feeling you are mocking me. More importantly, we are almost there! Please keep it up just a bit longer!"

"Okay!"

With those words, Michie mustered up some strength and somehow managed to push Rubbers back once more.

The Cerberus slid to a stop in front of Fujiko's underground laboratory.

"Keep him back for just a bit longer!"

Fujiko jumped down from the Cerberus and ran into the laboratory. Michie was shocked.

"Ah...Ah ya ya ya ya... Wait. I have to do this alone, arinsu?"

"I will be right back!"

"Eee! Please don't just run away!"

Rubbers leaped toward the fearful Michie. She somehow managed to

send out a group of bats to block the attack, but Rubbers stopped all of the bats with his body. The bats sank into his stretching body. They stretched his body far enough to jut out the other side, but it was not enough to break his strong skin.

"Wait... This is bad!"

Michie realized her strength had run out. She sent out some wind, but it was not enough to stop Rubbers.

Rubbers reached out his hand.

"Ee!"

Michie covered her face with her hands.

But Rubbers's hand never reached Michie.

"I have to say, I pulled this together quite quickly," said Fujiko with a grin.

She held what looked like a silver compressed gas cylinder in both hands. White smoke was floating up from the valve sticking from its opening.

Michie looked back at Rubbers.

The same smoke floating up from the cylinder was floating up from Rubbers's outstretched hand. Rubbers's hand was white and frozen solid.

"What did you do, arinsu?"

"This is liquid nitrogen! He may be able to defend against magical drops in temperature, but he cannot stop this with mana!"

Fujiko twisted the valve and sprayed the liquid toward Rubbers. Rubbers tried to put up a shield using mana, but Fujiko used a spell of her own to shatter that shield.

"You never need to defend, so I guessed making shields would not be your strong point. And it looks like I was right!"

As the liquid nitrogen washed across Rubbers, he let out a voiceless cry. Half of his body turned white as it froze and lost its elasticity.

"Vice president, attack now!"

"Sure thing!"

Michie fired her mechanical bats. As they flew from under her cape, the sharp blades attached to their wings attacked Rubbers. His tough skin had stopped those blades before, but now they easily left wounds.

"It's working!"

Michie focused the bats on Rubbers's frozen half. Repeated dry sounds rang out as the bats shattered Rubbers's body little by little.

Rubbers let out a bizarre cry. He mustered all his strength in his usable half and stretched it as far as he could. The situation suggested this was Rubbers's final attack that used everything he had.

"Is that all you can do!?"

Fujiko jumped back and avoided it. However, Rubbers had not been targeting Fujiko. His arm stretched to the Cerberus and reached into the bag attached to the saddle.

"Eh?"

Fujiko was confused, but she cried out in surprise and panic when she saw what Rubbers held as he retracted his arm.

"Oh, no!"

Rubbers had swiped the jar containing the cultivated piece of Akuto's body. That was the source of Fujiko's control over the demonic beasts.

Fujiko twisted the liquid nitrogen valve once more, but Rubbers abandoned the frozen half of his body. He stretched his body and the frozen portion broke off. With only half his body remaining, Rubbers accelerated by bouncing and fled down the passageway with the jar in his arm.

Fujiko did not have the strength to pursue him and it was obvious she would never catch up to him even if she did.

"What was that jar, arinsu?" asked Michie.

"You do not need to know," replied Fujiko with a shake of her head.

However, Fujiko understood what it meant that Rubbers had stolen it. Losing control over the demonic beasts was not that much of a problem at this point. However, that jar could be used to research Akuto's mana waves. Fujiko did not know what that would be used for, but it could lead to something terrible.

"A-at any rate, we fought off the enemy. It is time we checked on the situation," said Fujiko while feigning calm.

When Fujiko and Michie arrived at the spot at which the aircraft carrier Genkaku had crashed, they were surprised to find the headmaster helping Akuto to his feet. Joy immediately exploded within Fujiko.

"Ahh, so you were okay, Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko ran over as Akuto stood up.

"Yes. But that was definitely rough."

"If the black dragon had not saved him, he may have been in real danger. And if I had not used Kakei on the aircraft carrier, it may have been over for both of them," said the headmaster.

Some rubble collapsed and Peterhausen's face was visible inside. His head had a large wound. He was not bleeding, but that was simply due to the makeup of his body. The wound was clearly quite deep.

"Are you okay?" asked Akuto and Peterhausen shook his head.

"I make no habit of feigning strength. This will likely affect the fight from here on, so I will be honest. A few of my functions have likely been damaged. Even I can tell that something is wrong somewhere. I doubt it will affect my normal movement, but I cannot say what might happen when I support your magic."

"In that case, it may be no exaggeration to say we will be risking our lives," said Akuto sadly. He then spoke to Fujiko who was embracing him. "What is the situation?"

"I-I am sorry. Most of the demonic beasts have been routed. The soldiers are currently mopping the rest up. Also, Yamato Bouichirou abducted Soga Keena and went somewhere."

"Okay. Then I need to chase after him."

Akuto stood up and grimaced in pain.

"You mustn't! You need to fall back and rebuild your strength! You may

not be able to use the academy as your stronghold, but you can easily make a new hideout with the support of the black magicians! If you do not survive, all will be lost!”

Fujiko clung to Akuto, but he embraced her head and whispered into her ear.

“You have it all wrong. Making sure all is lost is exactly what I am trying to do.”

“Eh?”

Fujiko froze in place.

“Are you saying you plan to die, Akuto-sama?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought it through that far, but I suppose I will die in one meaning of the word. I may not lose my life, but if I prove that the gods can be killed, I might be able to eliminate at least some of this evil story from the world. And if that happens, I will no longer be the demon king. I can’t say what will happen after that,” explained Akuto lightly.

“You mustn’t! You are my hope! You saved me and gave me a reason to live!”

“But that just means you want to become a part of my story as the demon king. You want to deify an excellent system or a powerful individual, create a story around them, and rely on them. That will allow

people to use that story to hurt others."

"But there are people who can be saved by it!"

"That is exactly why I must do this. I will of course save those I can save on my own. Senpai, if you watch me, I intend to live up to that."

"Akuto-sama..."

Fujiko looked up at Akuto with teary eyes.

Akuto sent a signal to Peterhausen with his eyes.

"Okay, let's go."

"Please wait! I will go, too!" proclaimed Fujiko, but Akuto shook his head.

"I cannot allow that. I don't know what is going to happen from here on out."

"But..." Fujiko raised her voice as if her suppressed feelings were exploding out. "Why Keena? You are pursuing her, aren't you!?"

"That is because she will strip me of my story."

Fujiko collapsed limply to the ground when she heard Akuto's answer.

"So that is the difference... But, Akuto-sama, once you return, I promise you I will-..."

Fujiko trailed off.

As Akuto began to walk away, the headmaster called out to him.

"Do your best. You can try out what I taught you."

"I will. I intend to try out the first one right away."

Akuto climbed over the rubble and the outside air caused his hair to flutter.

Screams and cries of surprise erupted from the soldiers outside.

"It's the demon king!"

"He's still alive!"

"Forget the demonic beasts! Get him!"

The voices were accompanied by bullets raining down on Akuto.

"There's...still just as many as before. I just hope they'll run away if I

threaten them."

Akuto slid down the pile of rubble while deflecting the bullets with a hand as if he were swatting at bugs.

Not counting the Hattori ninja forces or the soldiers incapacitated by the aircraft carrier crash, over one thousand soldiers remained before his eyes. Akuto stood out in the open before those countless troops.

Akuto felt the soldiers' anger, malice, and fear pressing up against him.

"Now, I will bring an end to this rotten situation!"

Akuto jumped to the side and placed a hand on the spherical nose of the aircraft carrier that had knocked him out of the sky.

"He is...alive."

Junko raised her head. The Hattori ninja forces had been almost completely defeated. Counting the ninja who had helped her to her feet, she had only about 100 troops still able to fight. But no matter the situation, they would never forget their grudge against Akuto.

"Young lady! We may be injured and we may still have the Teruya family to deal with, but we must focus on the demon king if he is still alive!"

The Hattori ninja forces immediately began falling into formation and

running toward the school building where Akuto was.

“W-wait!”

Junko ran after them.

—Alive... He is alive! But... But I know now that you are not my enemy!

As Junko cried out in her heart, her gaze was on Eiko. Eiko had abandoned her command and surrounded herself with the Teruya ninja forces. She was using the demon king’s reappearance to distract everyone from her near-uncovered patricide. Normally, leaving her command post would qualify as dereliction of duty, but when the demon king was their only enemy, it almost looked as if she were taking command from a new position.

However, the Teruya ninja forces Eiko was fortified within were located a long distance from where Akuto had appeared. The Hattori ninja forces were even further away and were making their way toward Akuto. Those relative positions were due to the battle with Lily, but it was obvious Eiko was leaving the battle to other soldiers while she merely watched on.

—How cowardly are you!?

Junko gritted her teeth.

But Eiko was of course filled with scorn as she watched the approaching Hattori ninja forces.

"You incompetent fools! Hurry up and defeat the demon king!"

—Tch!

Junko reached for her short sword, but a ninja stopped her.

"Restrain yourself, young lady. Even if she did kill her father, any attack on her will be viewed as an assassination to take her position of power!"

"Ahh! And so I should stay silent and do what she says?"

Junko writhed in regret.

"Ah ha ha ha! Now this is funny!"

Eiko laughed as she watched on.

However, a dark shadow suddenly fell over them and Eiko turned around.

"E-ehhhhhh!?" cried Eiko in shock.

The aircraft carrier Genkaku was standing up perpendicular to the ground.

"I see. So this is how you use Kakei."

Akuto was impressed. He was holding Genkaku's spherical nose in both hands. The 350-meter aircraft carrier should have been too much for Akuto to hold, but he was easily lifting it up. He was of course assisting the process with mana telekinesis, but it was clearly all being done with his own power.

"Kakei sure is handy," said Akuto.

When Peterhausen heard that, he shrugged despite being a dragon.

"I am not an expert on this, but I get the feeling this is not Kakei."

"The headmaster said it involved using all of your muscles in cooperation. And I managed to do it, so it doesn't really matter!"

Akuto slowly tilted Genkaku. He let out a breath as he gathered energy and then swung the aircraft carrier like a bat.

It was as if a building lying on its side had started to roll. A roar swept across the ground and the aircraft carrier flew by horizontally.

The soldiers threw everything to the ground, leapt to the ground themselves, and prayed to their gods. Those who did not believe in the story of the gods could only despair. Those who did not get down on the ground were knocked away by the belly of the ship. Those lucky enough to get down in time were swept up by the wind create by Genkaku's passage and then they were slammed back into the ground.

With a single swing of that aircraft carrier, a military force of over one thousand was silenced. Akuto swung Genkaku back up, but its strength reached its limit at the peak of the swing and it broke in half.

The back half of Genkaku toppled onto the schoolyard while scattering fragments everywhere. An earthquake-like vibration and an explosion of dust spread from the impact point.

“That should just about do it.”

Akuto tossed aside the front half of Genkaku. This created another vibration and explosion of dust, but no one trembled in fear or ran away this time. Everyone stared blankly at Akuto.

Everyone was left speechless when faced with that overwhelming strength and impossible power.

—Ahh! This is it! That overwhelming power! That strength that can overturn everything!

Junko stood in the schoolyard amid the wind that was still blowing through. She trembled as she felt like that wind was blowing through her very heart.

She knew the boy who had wielded that power. He was obtuse, insensitive, and sincere. And his attack had blown everything away just as she had hoped it would.

—I was right from the very beginning. I understood everything from the moment I first met him!

Junko began walking forward.

The only troops left unscathed were the Teruya ninja forces and the Hattori ninja forces who had been farther away from the school building. Eiko naturally shouted at Junko.

“Stop the demon king! That’s an order!”

Junko grinned.

“You think that will work without your hostage?”

Eiko looked confused, but she quickly shook her head and pointed toward the Hattori ninja forces.

“Don’t you dare act like I am a villain! Don’t you all care about the honor of your young lady’s family? If you oppose me here, your family is done for!”

One of the threatened ninja placed a hand on Junko’s shoulder.

“Young lady. I understand you are angry, but our enemy here is the abominable demon king.”

Junko silently shook off his hand and placed a hand on the Sword of Sohaya.

The sheath made a clicking noise.

—The god will only answer when I take an action convenient to the god.

Junko recalled what her grandmother had told her.

Power welled up within her. This power did not come from anger.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Junko cried out in joy.

“Y-young lady...” asked a worried ninja, but Junko turned a smiling face toward him.

“I will be betraying you all now!”

Junko easily drew the Sword of Sohaya. The blade shined with a strange rainbow-colored light.

“Justice and honor did not save us! And so I will live for the man I love! This betrayal is love!”

The ninja were shaken by that announcement and a commotion spread through them. Before, that commotion would have caused Junko to worry and hesitate to act, but it now filled her with confidence and energy. As the ninja saw this, they all chose to serve her.

"This is not a betrayal! We will do as you wish!"

Junko nodded as her heart trembled.

"Very good!"

And with the rainbow-colored sword in hand, Junko ran toward Eiko.

"Wha-!? Are you joining the demon king's side!?"

Eiko frantically began to fall back.

"Exactly! But I was able to draw the Sword of Sohaya when I decided to use it on you! You were not chosen by god!"

"B-but our god would never aid an ally of the demon king!"

"I am merely using our god! I have been given the power I need to cut you down! How I use that power afterwards is up to me!"

"Don't be ridiculous! You are alone while I have three hundred soldiers remaining who will do whatever I ask!" roared Eiko.

The Teruya ninja forces fell into a new formation with the armored warriors in the center. They were all either uninjured or already healed.

"Three hundred, you say!? That saves me the effort of counting!"

Junko held a hand in front of her chest and formed a sign.

"Ninja Art – Scattered Moonlight!"

This was Junko's special technique that created multiple versions of herself. As she ran, Junko split into two. And then both versions of her split into two as well.

"What!? You can do that!?" shouted Eiko.

The Junkos continued to double in number. After repeating the process several times, a great army made up of Junkos had been created.

"This is...three hundred!"

Three hundred Junkos rushed toward the Teruya ninja forces.

"Impossible!"

Eiko cowered down from the wind that blew by her side.

It came down to a single attack. The three hundred Junkos each defeated one of the three hundred powerful soldiers of the Teruya family in a single strike.

"It didn't even take one second!?"

"Of course not. None of them were strong enough to need a second attack."

All three hundred Junkos bared their teeth in a smile and surrounded Eiko.

Eiko looked around in search of something, but none of her troops could move.

"W-wait. We're old friends, right!?"

"Of course! And that is why I can never forgive you!"

The three hundred Junkos rushed at the single Eiko.

This time, Eiko had nowhere to run. Eiko was swallowed up by the approaching wave of Junkos, but Eiko was quickly knocked up into the air. To make it easier for the next strike, one Junko hit Eiko with the back of her sword such that Eiko was knocked into the air.

"Ohhh!"

Another Junko jumped up after her. She gave another strike with the back of her sword, hitting Eiko further up. The next Junko then jumped up after her.

Each time a Junko struck Eiko, that Junko would disappear.

Finally, only the real Junko was left high up in the air. She held the Sword of Sohaya in preparation to strike Eiko who had already lost consciousness. She was not going to strike with the back of the sword. She reversed her grip and held the front of the sword toward the girl.

"I will slice that life of yours in two!"

Junko swung the finishing blow down toward Eiko's abdomen.

But just as her blade was about to bisect Eiko...

The Sword of Sohaya let out a clang. It had been stopped by a right arm that had appeared in midair.

"Please wait."

Those emotionless words were accompanied by a hole opening in the air. Starting with the right arm, a figure emerged. It was Korone. While still holding the Sword of Sohaya back, she held Eiko in her arms.

"Korone..." muttered Junko with the malice gone from her mind.

"You must not kill her. She must live and make up for her crimes. I must ensure that happens."

Korone then brought Eiko down to the ground.

"Where have you been?" asked Junko as she followed Korone down.



Once she landed, Korone said, "I was deactivated, but your grandmother saved me. I have a message from her."

"What is it?"

"She will handle everything afterwards, so you can pursue whatever you like without worry."

Korone expressionlessly held out her hand and raised her thumb.

The sight was so ridiculous that Junko burst out laughing.

She also cried a bit. She wished she had simply done this from the beginning.

She wiped away the tears and saw a black dragon flying through the sky.

Junko and Korone watched it fly by.

"He never seems concerned about me."

"I do not think many girls would want someone like him concerned about them," commented Korone and Junko laughed.

"Heh. Then I suppose I should go after him."

"Please leave things here to me. I will start by arresting her."

Korone began handcuffing Eiko's unconscious form.

"Thanks."

Junko nodded and began walking toward the remains of the aircraft carrier to see if any means of transportation had fallen out anywhere.

Chapter 4: The Perfect Ending?

It was clear where Bouichirou was headed: the temple of Suhara. It was near the Kouga Village, so it was a long flight.

"I apologize for being unable to teleport there."

Peterhausen gave a rare apology with an admirable attitude.

"I can't force you past your limits. More importantly, this might be the end. Can you tell me everything you know?" asked Akuto sadly.

"Yes. This is likely the best time. The demon king is a human yet not a human. It is an existence created from a modification of a human's internal mana."

"I see. Then do I have parents?"

"You do have birth parents. You can rejoice over that. And I sympathize with you for being abandoned afterwards."

"Thanks. So are you saying the group known as black magicians created both you and me?"

"You could say that is the case...and you could say it is not. The reason for the gods gaining a will of their own is not fully known. However, we can make some educated guesses. It seems the complex network connections themselves gained this will. And the life that was created, the gods, had no sense of self and no lifespan. For that reason, it

constantly wished to die. Yet you humans never realized this. And long ago, a certain man built the system known as the demon king. The demon king can kill the gods and allow them to rest in peace."

"Rest in peace?"

Akuto was confused by this unexpected term.

"That is the best way of explaining it in your words. They shall be given a sense of self and their will shall be eliminated from this world. It is a difficult concept. However, it may be easier to understand in terms of your world's story if you think of it as computers having a soul, too. This sense of self is given to them by the Law of Identity. That is an existence that forms a pair with the demon king."

"Do you mean Keena?"

"Yes. However, the Law of Identity and the demon king can be born any number of times. If things are not progressing well, the gods can kill them and wait another century. The gods have been repeating that process again and again."

"So the gods are just as selfish as humans."

"Don't say that. Anyway, I was created to maintain the system once the gods die. I have a sense of self. That L'Isle-Adam told you that a sense of self will gradually form if one has a body and a position, didn't she? If a god with a sense of self ruled the world, it would be filled with conflict just as before, but those conflicts would likely be filled with a sort of

humanness. That is what the one who created me wished for.”

Peterhausen seemed to be recalling the distant past as he spoke.

“Is that why you love fighting so much?”

“That is just what a courageous king is. Or you could kill the gods and become king yourself. That path is still open.”

“Is that what you want?”

“If possible. But, master, do whatever it is you want. I have had enough fun. This has been one of the best rampages I can remember. Due to that wildcard named Yamato Bouichirou, it did not quite reach all-out war, but you are still the first to win.”

“I see.” Akuto let out a sorrowful sigh and continued, “Let me apologize ahead of time: I’m sorry.”

“I do not know what exactly is going to happen, but you do not need to say the rest. I have a hunch where this will lead.” Peterhausen flapped his gigantic wings. “Now, two powerful enemies await up ahead. We need to enjoy this!”

He waited alone up in the sky.

Brave’s arms were folded as he awaited the demon king as bravely as

his name would suggest.

As the two confronted each other, the first to give into the silence and speak was Hiroshi.

"Let me ask you again: why are you doing this?"

"That again? I will bring an end to the issues surrounding me. If that will reform the world, what's wrong with that?"

"What about those who do not want that change!?" shouted Hiroshi.

Akuto glanced down. A thick forest covered the ground, but a figure was visible in a slight clearing.

"If you are referring to that girl, I think I can handle that."

Hiroshi had left Yuuko waiting down below. When he realized Akuto had noticed, Hiroshi shook his head in displeasure.

"You are always like this! You accept things without telling anyone anything!"

"You would not understand even if I told you. This is enough. Let me past."

"Stop being so selfish!"

Hiroshi accelerated.

As Akuto prepared himself for a fight, Peterhausen spoke to him.

"How do you intend to win? He will use the mana canceller of his anti-demon king mode from the beginning. If that happens, this will not be easy."

"I just have to charge in. I'll finish this in a single blow," said Akuto carelessly.

Peterhausen was surprised.

"Oh? How reliable. Do you have a plan?"

"No. My only plan is to go in without a plan."

"If you say so. I will trust you."

Peterhausen grinned and then began accelerating.

Two oddly colored shooting stars collided in the sky. The flash of light lasted only an instant.

"No way!"

Hiroshi could not believe it. His right hand's high-frequency blade had dug into Akuto's left arm. And Akuto was pressing his right arm against the high-temperature plasma ball Hiroshi had used as a shield in his left hand.

Akuto had truly charged in without a plan. He had spread his arms and received both of Hiroshi's attacks.

"Gaaaah!"

But Akuto let out a cry. The mana canceller was returning his body back to that of a normal person. His left arm had been partially severed and was dangling down. It was spewing fresh blood. The portion of his right arm that had touched the plasma had been instantly vaporized. He continued to press forward with his right arm, so it looked like the arm was gradually disappearing.

The pain had to be unimaginable. Nevertheless, Akuto continued to move forward as if trying to embrace Hiroshi.

"S-stop this, aniki!"

Hiroshi let out a pained cry. He stopped his high-frequency blade and tried to get rid of the plasma, but the voice of the Brave suit's control computer reverberated within his visor.

<A foreign object has entered within the shield, so the plasma cannot be removed. Please release the shield.>

"It can't be..."

Hiroshi tried to remove the plasma ball from his left hand, but Akuto pushed forward with his right arm.

"P-please stop, aniki!"

Hiroshi reflexively released the plasma. A burning wind burst out and enveloped Hiroshi, Akuto, and Peterhausen.

"Waaaah!"

The Brave suit placed a shield around Hiroshi's body and Peterhausen's body was able to withstand heat even without mana, but Akuto was a normal human.

"Aniki!" screamed Hiroshi.

But Akuto's face remained directly in front of Hiroshi.

He had forced himself inside Brave's shield.

<Shield overload. Battery almost drained. Switching to life preservation mode. Thirty second recharge necessary before normal mode is available.>

That mechanical voice rang out.

Akuto grinned.

Hiroshi realized this was what Akuto had wanted even if it cost him most of his arms and the half of his body he had lost in the plasma explosion.

"I-it can't be!"

Hiroshi and Akuto fell intertwined toward the forest below.

"I knew you were not capable of cruelty. If I had you injure me to cruel levels, I knew you would hesitate. And that would forcibly drain your battery. That is how the system works."

As he fell, Akuto's body regenerated. It seemed he was able to draw in mana now.

"You're...You're horrible, aniki..." Hiroshi began to shed tears. "Why are you such a cruel person? You really are a demon king..."

"I know I can be cruel. If I do not return, please tell everyone how cruel I was."

"If you don't return?"

"Killing the gods is the end for me as well. That is what I mean."

Akuto placed a hand on Hiroshi's head. He squeezed and the Brave suit's helmet shattered.

"Wah!" cried Hiroshi as his face was exposed.

"I try to understand how you are right as well," said Akuto.

Then the two of them struck the ground.

"Uuh..." groaned Hiroshi.

He could no longer use the suit, so he should have struck the ground at full force, but Akuto supported him.

Akuto stood firmly on the ground and lowered Hiroshi.

Yuuko ran over and let out a short scream when she saw Akuto.

"Don't worry. He is alive," Akuto told Yuuko as she cowered down.

Hiroshi stood up and turned his face resolutely toward Yuuko.

"Eh?"

Yuuko looked surprised.

"I...never meant to hide it. It was a coincidence. But...I saw no reason to go out of my way to tell you..."

Hiroshi was flustered.

Yuuko then began laughing.

"Ah ha ha. You idiot. No matter who it was inside, you were cool."

When he saw that, Akuto began to walk away. However, Yuuko gave a start and stiffened when she saw Akuto move.

"I know. You cannot remain yourself while I am around."

Akuto raised a hand and called down Peterhausen.

"Wait!" called out Hiroshi. Akuto turned around and Hiroshi asked, "Why won't you remove the demonic beast's mana from her body?"

"Because that mana's activity is being controlled by Suhara. If I interfered, it would put her in danger."

"But...that means...if the god dies!"

"I will...no, he will fill the role of the god afterwards."

Akuto pointed toward Peterhausen.

"Th-then, you intended to do this from the beginning? But...that will mean the demon king stands at the top of the world. Wh-what will you do then, aniki?" asked Hiroshi frantically as he was overcome by unpleasant thoughts.

However, Akuto muttered a complaint rather than directly answering.

"That is something that cannot be avoided. It is something I have to do."

Bouichirou entered the temple of Suhara. The unconscious shrine guards on the path behind him showed what resistance he had faced.

Bouichirou held Keena within the tranquil space in which Teruya Keizou had once carried out his duties.

"She is the Law of Identity."

"What do you want, one who has come to bind the Contract of the One with her?"

He heard voices. Two shrine maidens appeared from behind the god tree.

They were the L'Isle-Adams that supported Suhara. The two beautiful

girls were dressed as shrine maidens, but they were armed. One held a naginata and the other held a bow.

Bouichirou laughed at the question.

"Do I even need to say it? I will take control of the gods. A god with a will of its own is unneeded."

When the two shrine maidens heard his response, they leaped to the left and right.

"In that case."

"We will stop you."

"It is too late for that."

Bouichirou tossed Keena up into the air and swung his arms sharply to the left and right.

Both shrine maidens stopped moving at the same moment.

Bouichirou gently caught Keena when she fell and began walking once more.

"Wait."

"The Law of Identity is meant to take our will and recreate the universe."

The shrine maidens spoke, but they could do nothing but speak. Their upper bodies had been severed from their lower bodies, so they could only lie on the ground.

"I know that is meant to prevent an invasion from another dimension and let you evolve to another dimension, but what good is it if you ignore mankind? The gods' method will destroy mankind."

"No, mankind will remain as data."

"The data has been saved to the quantum network and that network will overcome the dimension."

"I see no humans in that," said Bouichirou with a hint of annoyance.

He swung his right hand to silence one of the L'Isle-Adams.

"The gods will take the dead humans with them to some far place. That is a standard religious view. Mankind has wished for that for ages. We know this to be true," continued the other one.

Bouichirou shook his head.

"I do not object to maintaining that story, but that is all the more reason for the gods to not have a will of their own."

Once he arrived in front of the god tree, Bouichirou softly lowered Keena to the ground.

Keena was unconscious, but she sat motionless while leaning against his legs.

"Now, I know the gods cannot oppose the Law of Identity. Prepare the stage for the Contract of the One."

As Bouichirou spoke, the god tree began to split to the left and right.

A space spread out within. It looked as if wooden structures had been folded on top of each other infinitely. It was likely made with the special construction technology that used mana transfers. It was not actually infinite, but vermillion-lacquered wooden corridors were connected by plain wooden stairways like a labyrinth. It all looked like a complex network.

Keena woke and looked up at the corridors

"Ahh... You came here, didn't you!?" She let out a strange voice that sounded both absentminded and despairing. She held her hands together and turned toward Bouichirou. "Hey, please stop this! It's not too late!"

Bouichirou smiled awkwardly.

"Please listen," he said. "If I do not do this, humanity will disappear from this world."

"No! You are wrong! Your method will not escape the curse of irrepeatability!"

"Wha-...?"

Bouichirou finally found himself dumbfounded.

"Please imagine it! Imagine that the gods lose their will and mankind continues on to the age you came from. The path leading there may be different, but the outcome will certainly be the same. Someone will come to defeat you...yes, you. A human will become the demon king of their own will and come to kill you once you become a god. That is all that will change," said Keena.

Bouichirou felt something cold run down his spine. It was sweat. He perfectly understood what Keena meant. And knowing that, he trembled at the foolishness of his own actions.

"You were the sole survivor of mankind. And while bearing that last hope, you attempted to correct this foolishness. Given the position you came from, your actions are not based in pride. You are a true hero. But no matter how many times you try to redo it, the outcome will always be the same."

Bouichirou looked back at Keena's face.

Her expression was identical to that of Sudou Rimu, his former lover and the final Law of Identity.

"Why... Why isn't it me!?" Bouichirou cried out in anguish.

"Don't cry. You are..."

Keena began saying something, but Bouichirou stopped her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and tried to forcibly drag her into the god tree.

"No!"

"If the result will be the same, I can at least..."

Bouichirou tried to restrain Keena as she struggled, but he suddenly stopped.

He had seen someone else in the temple.

Keena turned around as well and saw the person. And when she did, her face lit up.

"A-chan!"

"Normally, this would be the time to say something cool, but the two of us have certain similarities. I understand how you reached such a pathetic situation, at least to a certain extent. For that reason, I will not say anything."

Akuto began walking forward.

Bouichirou let go of Keena and his expression grew refreshed as if he had given up on everything.

"I have always been troubled by the demon king, but this is the first time any of them has been like you."

"How sad. In the end, we are doing nothing but cleaning up after a system created by mankind. Then again, that could describe most any job."

"How ironic. After living for hundreds of years, it is only now that I find someone who understands me."

"That is because we seek similar things. But there is one definite difference between us."

"Yes, there is: Luck with women," said Bouichirou with a smile.

Akuto stared blankly back at him.

"Yes, I suppose my luck with women is pretty bad," commented Akuto.



"Ha ha. Now that is something very different between us. Now I have really come to hate you. The winner here can enact his plan."

Bouichirou raised a hand and pulled a giant sword out of thin air.

"In the end, I suppose that's our only option."

Akuto tried to step forward, but Bouichirou attacked without warning. His sword roared as it flew horizontally.

"Ohh!"

Akuto jumped back to avoid it, but Bouichirou mercilessly attacked again.

Bursting sounds were heard as the air was sliced apart and a portion of Akuto's body and clothes scattered through the air. Akuto had somehow avoided a fatal blow, but the arm he used to defend and the areas he had not been able to cover were not unharmed.

"So you have impudently learned to dodge!"

When they had first fought, Akuto had been able to do nothing more than guard, but now he could at least deflect the sword with his arm. Thanks to that, he avoided being knocked backwards, but he still could not retaliate.

"But you still leave too many openings!"

As he pointed that out, Bouichirou swung his sword horizontally at Akuto's feet.

"Uuh!"

Akuto was unable to react to this unexpected attack and collapsed to his knees.

"A-chan!"

Keena cried out and tried to move forward, but Akuto stopped her with a glance.

"A-..."

Keena stopped and gulped.

Akuto could not move. His knees had been completely smashed. He was in the process of regenerating them, but Bouichirou was showing no sign of giving him time to be able to stand up once more.

"It looks like the headmaster taught you a bit about how to fight," said Bouichirou as he swung up his sword to deliver the finishing blow.

"He did, but it seems I didn't learn Kakei properly."

Akuto shook his head in resignation.

"So you feign innocence even on the verge of death. Even so, I will take that as your last words!"

Bouichirou swung down his sword.

The blade accurately pierced Akuto's head.

No matter how much regenerative ability Akuto had and no matter how tough his body might be, this was not a strike he could withstand.

The large sword sliced Akuto in two.

...Or it should have.

"!"

Bouichirou was shocked by how odd the strike had felt.

The sword had stabbed into the temple floor, but it had sliced through Akuto's body at the same time.

"Tch!"

Bouichirou immediately abandoned the sword and jumped back.

Akuto was definitely there, but the sword had not affected him in the slightest. It was as if he were a hologram.

"It can't be!" shouted Bouichirou.

He had realized the real Akuto was standing directly behind him.

"Hahh!"

Akuto jammed his fist into Bouichirou's gut when the man turned around.

A shockwave shot out of Bouichirou's back and he doubled over.

"I-impossible..." groaned Bouichirou while struggling to breath.

"Of the tricks I was taught, I can pull this one off pretty well," said Akuto. The image of him kneeling that the sword had sliced in two blurred and disappeared. "I created a mana screen and projected a reflected image there. It really is a cheap trick. The headmaster said you can only use it once in a fistfight and as long as it takes for your opponent to notice if they're using projectiles."

"I-I fell for such a stupid trick?"

"I hate falling for stupid tricks, too. I know how you feel," said Akuto, but he still punched Bouichirou again.

This time, Bouichirou's body bent without him uttering a word.

Akuto punched him yet again, but not out of anger or malice. As he continued to punch his opponent to keep him from moving, Akuto was filled with a feeling similar to sorrow.

Finally, Bouichirou passed out and collapsed.

Akuto lightly shook his wrist as if to say something was wrong.

And then he heard a calm voice.

"Demon king, it is time to bind the Contract of the One with the Law of Identity."

One of the collapsed shrine maidens was looking up at Akuto.

Akuto silently walked over to Keena.

"A-chan..."

She looked up at Akuto as well.

Akuto took her hand.

"This has become quite a big deal, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but it isn't over yet."

Akuto and Keena exchanged a glance and seemed to come to a silent understanding. They nodded simultaneously and turned toward the

shrine maiden.

"We will not bind the contract."

"We can do that at any time later."

The shrine maiden seemed to panic despite being a L'Isle-Adam.

"I-impossible! Then why are you here?"

"I will kill the god here so everyone will understand! I will destroy this place and stop this god from functioning as a network terminal!"

As he spoke, Akuto reached a hand toward the sky above.

"Th-that is meaningless... Even if the terminal dies, the god itself is a will living within the network. This will only eliminate a portion of the functions and accumulated data that is known as Suhara. You will only cause chaos and-..."

"I know that." Akuto cut off the shrine maiden's explanation. "But doing this will wake some people up to the truth."

As he spoke, mana began to gather around Akuto. When he had first awoken, he had been unable to control his mana, and now he was planning to cause a pure mana explosion just as before.

"You might disappear as well. Is that what you want? What will that accomplish? That will change nothing," said the shrine maiden.

"No, it will change something. At the very least, it will end the story of the demon king's rebellion. And that will finally allow people to face the gods who have wills but no sense of self."

"I understand what you plan to do. Before you can do that, we will eliminate you and the Law of Identity. We will keep this incident in mind and hope for better results with the next demon king."

As the shrine maiden spoke, the temple began to tremble. This was not being caused by Akuto's mana waves.

"The defense system has activated. The god tree which acts as the terminal can now move as an individual unit."

The god tree which had been opened in the center of the temple closed once more. And that object which resembled a giant tree glowed with mana light and began to float.

The temple began to collapse. The structure had been built around the giant tree, so the roof crumbled and then the floor Akuto and Keena stood on began to crumble as well.

"Kyah!" screamed Keena.

Akuto held her in his arms. The area below the floor was not all that tall, but they could be crushed by objects falling from above.

"A-chan!"

Keena stopped Akuto and pointed behind them as he tried to jump up. Bouichirou was collapsed there.

"Understood."

Akuto nodded and grabbed Bouichirou's hand. That must have caused him to come to because he looked up. Akuto nodded toward the man's surprised expression.

"Let's go."

Akuto then jumped. He repeatedly kicked off the crumbling building materials and made his way up to the roof.

"Mankind still needs the gods. And the gods need mankind. I cannot allow you to interfere in the moment in which the two will join together."

The shrine maiden's voice eerily echoed up from below. Akuto looked down just in time to see the head of the severed upper half of the shrine maiden get dragged down by the crumbling floor.

"Kh..."

Akuto averted his gaze and looked up into the sky instead.

The floating god tree had already ascended a fair distance.

"Peterhausen!" he called.

In response, Peterhausen flew down from where he had been waiting in midair.

"This is our final job, isn't it!?"

"Yes. And this is my final request as your friend."

Akuto left Keena and Bouichirou below and mounted Peterhausen.

"Wait. Are you really intending to risk your life for this?"

Bouichirou pointed toward the god tree, but Akuto only faced forward.

"I am. I was born as an existence with a ridiculous goal. If I can act of my own free will in the very end, that's fine by me," replied Akuto without looking back.

"This may not change the outcome. It may be as I was told and this will change nothing and mankind will still be destroyed. Why are you so convinced this is what you should do?" asked Bouichirou.

Akuto instructed Peterhausen to take off.

"Because I have learned that being able to empathize with the people in your everyday life is more important than faith or some story far removed from your life. If I destroy this system, people will be able to face other people." He then turned toward Keena. "You were right, Keena. If everyone can eat rice together, we might just have world peace."

Peterhausen powerfully flew up into the sky, but...

"Rice!" cried Keena in a lovely voice.

"Eh?"

Akuto was confused by the change in Keena's attitude, but Peterhausen had already flown high into the sky. The god tree moved slowly, so they had already reached it.

But surprisingly, Keena flew up into the sky herself and pursued Akuto.

"A-chan, you can't! You can't make them answer to you!"

"Wh-what? Do you have a separate consciousness while you're the Law of Identity?" Akuto asked as Keena flew alongside Peterhausen, but she was not listening.

"A-chan, tell me what you're planning to do!"

Keena spoke bluntly to Akuto.



"Um, well... I'm going to charge into the god tree and transfer its functions over to Peterhausen. And then I'll destroy it," he answered.

Keena shook her head.

"You can't. You plan to die, don't you?"

Having it stated so plainly left Akuto unsure what to say.

"No, it isn't necessarily going to happen. It will certainly be dangerous and if I succeed in killing even one god, I will lose any place in society. So..."

"No! Idiot! Idiot! I won't let you!"

Keena violently shook her head.

But that was when Peterhausen let out a shout.

"Master, it is too late! We are going to charge into the god tree!"

"Then we have no choice. Keena, outta the way!"

Akuto shoved Keena.

She flew a good distance away from Peterhausen, but she was clearly not ready to give up. She began stripping off her clothes while flying and she vanished.

Now Akuto could not know where she was.

"...Let's go!"

However, Akuto could not change his plans.

Peterhausen fired a spiral-carved metal stake from his mouth which opened a large hole in the god tree's body. He then charged inside through it.

"The inside is a pseudo alternate dimension. We and our opponents have real forms, so we can take damage," warned Peterhausen.

Inside was the same wooden labyrinth seen when Bouichirou had opened the god tree. Their vision was filled with nothing but vermillion-lacquered pillars and bare wood corridors.

"Transfer over its function," instructed Akuto.

Peterhausen sent cables stretching in all four directions from various parts of his body. They all plugged into connectors located in the corridors.

"Once the transfer is complete, I will release those like Hattori Yuuko from the god's control. But the transfer will take some time. Until then..."

Peterhausen trailed off.

Akuto looked around and realized why.

Shrine maiden L'Isle-Adams appeared from all over the seemingly

infinite corridors. They all had their doll-like eyes turned toward Akuto and Peterhausen.

"Those are real...right?"

Peterhausen nodded in response to Akuto's whispered question.

"These corridors look infinite, but the space in here is finite. And there may be a large number of L'Isle-Adams, but they are of course not infinite either."

But they were still at a severe disadvantage. Akuto had to protect Peterhausen who could not move. If even a single cable were severed, the transfer would be incomplete and Yuuko and other Suhara followers like her would be put in danger.

Naturally, the demon king and the gods were no longer cooperating. To the gods, Akuto and Peterhausen were foreign objects that needed to be killed.

"Dammit. Am I not going to be able to accomplish anything after making all those dramatic announcements!?" roared Akuto.

However, Peterhausen laughed heartily.

"Not yet. Just because I cannot move does not mean I cannot fight. Let us fight back, master. You may have said you would have nowhere to go afterwards, but you can always continue fighting until every last terminal of the gods has been destroyed!"

"Heh... That could work, too," muttered Akuto.

As if that had been their cue, the countless shrine maidens all rushed toward Peterhausen.

The shrine maidens swarmed Peterhausen like ferocious ants attacking their prey. Akuto flew around, trying to tear them off, but he had his hands full with the shrine maidens attacking him from behind. Their attacks showed no mercy and it was painfully clear they were strange existences that could not truly communicate with humans.

"Anyone who fights like this shouldn't be guiding people!"

Akuto's anger rose to the surface. His mana increased and a whirlwind appeared around him.

However...

"Gaaaaaah!"

Peterhausen let out a scream.

"What is it?"

Akuto looked over.

The wound caused by the aircraft carrier striking him was glowing.

"Oh, no..."

Akuto realized what was causing Peterhausen's pain.

The heavy burden of transferring over Suhara's functions, fighting, and Akuto's mana control had exceeded the limit of his ability.

"I can handle this! Do not worry about me!" shouted Peterhausen in a deeply pained but intensely courageous voice.

"But!"

"We were always planning to die, right!? We were determined to save everyone else while sacrificing only ourselves. Taking safety measures here would be too foolish! Master, I will remove the limiter on your mana control. That will lessen the burden on me and allow you full use over your power! But in exchange..."

"You can't guarantee my body will last!? Sounds fair to me!"

Akuto once more began focusing the mana in his body.

Once his body began glowing, the shrine maidens approaching him were knocked back by an impact.

"Ooohhhhhhhhhh!"

Akuto was aware he could not control his mana. No matter how hard he tried, he could not stop the torrent of power or the rising emotion.

Akuto used that power to blow away the shrine maidens clinging to Peterhausen. The freed dragon cried out in joy over the absence of the obstacles.

"I have taken over Suhara's functions! I can now release the people from the god's control at any moment! We can blow away everything here without worry!"

But Akuto did not reply.

Akuto's body was producing tremendous heat. As he lay curled up and unmoving, his body gradually melted the floor and sank down. His tremendous energy was beginning to melt the pseudo alternate dimension itself.

"Wait... master! Master! Kh... I cannot restrain his power anymore!"

Peterhausen's expression showed confusion for once, but that confusion quickly turned to fear.

"To prevent further encroachment into the pseudo alternate dimension, the pseudo alternate dimension is closing in on itself!"

The corridors began to be crushed as they folded up into each other, one by one. The shrine maidens were mercilessly caught in the middle and were crushed by space itself. Nothing remained of them afterwards. Only nothingness was left.

The folding of space was approaching Akuto at tremendous speed.

"You need to release your power some way or another! Let it explode! If you do, you can blow away the god tree, pseudo alternate dimension and all!" cried Peterhausen.

However, Akuto was unable to move an inch. When he saw that, Peterhausen shook his head.

"...It must be too difficult."

"Hey, why is it so difficult?"

"Mana is controlled by one's emotions. My master is still afraid of releasing his power," replied Peterhausen before looking around to see who had asked.

"But he kept saying he was going to do it," replied the voice.

Peterhausen realized Keena was floating nearby while invisible.

"His will to reform the world is strong. However, he is bothered by the fact that he will be unable to take responsibility for the world afterwards.

After all, he lacks the ability to construct a new world. ...At any rate, you need to escape. You will be caught in the blast here."

"Then why aren't you escaping, Pe-chan?"

"I have a duty to just barely control my master's mana and the subsequent explosion. If I do, I can save him."

"Then will you die, Pe-chan?" asked Keena in surprise.

"I will. A dragon with the exact same abilities as me may be created later, but a dragon without the same history and sense of self as me will not be me."

"I don't want that! I don't like this ending! This is just the kind of ending boys like!" wailed Keena.

Peterhausen smiled kindly.

"Then go tell my master that he is wrong. Teach him that he can create something in the world after the story of the gods has been ended."

"Pe-chan..."

Keena appeared and stroked Peterhausen's head.

"Please take this. I apologize that it is nothing exciting."

Peterhausen willed one of his fangs to fall into Keena's hand.

Keena looked at it, nodded, and ran over to Akuto while holding the fang tightly in her hand. Akuto was producing a tremendous amount of light, but Keena easily entered within that light and heat.

As Akuto suffered, Keena's naked form gently embraced him and she whispered in his ear.

"Don't worry, A-chan. I will do my best to make sure everyone gets along for your sake."

Akuto opened his eyes.

And one of the gods was obliterated.

"Why did it end up like this?" asked Keena.

She had not been speaking to anyone, but she received a response.

"That is a difficult question to answer. It truly is."

Keena's eyes were closed. In fact, she was unconscious. She had not actually spoken out loud. So why had she received a response while more or less dreaming?

"Who are you?"

"I am me. I am the other you inside you," said the Law of Identity.

"The other me inside me?"

"Yes. I am the eternal me who will remain even if you die. I am the me that proves that I am me. It may be difficult to understand, but that is what it is. That is why there were people trying to kill you. Those who wish to use the eternal me planned to kill you in hopes that I would reside within someone more convenient."

"I see. I guess we both have it tough."

"Yes. It is quite tough."

They both smiled for a while.

"So what can you do?"

"I can do many things. But I may not be able to do anything."

"Which is it?"

"Who knows. Not even I know. However, I understand what you want to do, at least to a certain extent."

"Yeah. So can you do that?"

"Well, I think so. You want to grant the wishes of the two men who fell in love with me, right?"

"Yeah!" said Keena with an energetic nod.

"I will give true peace to the soul of the time traveler."

"What do you mean?"

"His true desire was happiness for the person I once was in the future. I will guarantee that for him. That is why he was attempting to control the gods."

"What about Bouichirou-san himself?"

"That is for him to decide. Will he settle down in some era or will he start all this anew in the next era?"

"No. I mean how will he know that this future person will be happy?"

"He must believe that it is true. Yes, Bouichirou-san must trust the boy who was chosen to be the demon king."

"Trust A-chan?"

"He took action to oppose his destiny in order to change the future. Bouichirou-san must trust that boy. And that is why only Akuto-san can truly guarantee peace for Bouichirou-san's soul."

"But A-chan is..."

"Yes. If nothing changes, Akuto-san will remain the enemy of mankind. He does not wish for that either. And so I will alter everyone's memories a bit...just a tiny bit."

"Everyone's memories?"

"Yes. I will merely make it so it was not him but another demon king that went on a rampage today. That small change will allow him the same life he has had so far."

"I wonder if A-chan will be happy about that."

"That is a good question. Living the same life he has had so far will also mean he must continue to fight. And an even greater destiny will await him!"

"A-chan will be fine," declared Keena confidently.

"That is good to hear. I have always been observing this world, but even I hesitated to give life to the system known as the gods. The flow of human history is so lovely you can simply get lost in it, isn't it?"

And then the conversation between the Law of Identity and Keena came to an end.

Fortunately, the equipment belonging to one of the airborne troops had survived unharmed. Junko had borrowed it to pursue Akuto. However, it had taken her a long time to find it, so she was very late.

As she flew, Junko had been shocked to see Suhara's god tree floating in the sky. As a Suhara follower, she recognized it right away and knew the situation was well out of the ordinary.

However, what she saw next was even more shocking.

The god tree exploded from within.

The explosion was likely visible from dozens of kilometers away. The god tree became a gigantic pillar of fire that seemed to connect the heavens and the earth.

Junko was at a complete loss for words.

No sight could have more obviously made one think of the death of a god. Next to the pillar of fire, a black dragon of smoke spread its black wings as if mocking everything around it. Junko knew Peterhausen, so she immediately recognized this as his silhouette, but those that did not know him would likely have seen it as a demonic image.

A ring of shockwaves spread out as if it would cover the entire land of the empire in an instant. The sound reverberated beyond the clouds.

"How could this be!?"

Junko landed to avoid the shockwave, but she still heard the thick trees around her creaking in the wind. She stabbed the Sword of Sohaya into the ground to anchor herself, but she would have been blown away had she not done so.

Even so, the explosive blast died down in a few seconds. Junko returned to the sky to check on the situation.

In that instant, she saw something strange. Something was rising into the sky from the center of the blast. It was a pillar of light made up of tiny particles. That light formed a thin cloud and spread as if to cover the entire world.

"What in the world happened?" muttered Junko without thinking.

She rushed to the site of the blast and found Akuto and Keena in the center of the crater.

"Are you two okay?"

Junko ran over to them and Akuto collapsed onto Keena.

"Wake up. Are you okay? I have so much I want to ask you. What did you do? And where did that Yamato Bouichirou man-...?"

Junko suddenly found herself dumbfounded.

"Ah! It's Junko-chan!" shouted Keena innocently. She squirmed, got up, and waved her hand. "Hiiii!"

"Eh?"

Akuto also got up and turned toward Junko.

"Y-you idiot!"

Junko blushed and started waving her hands around.

Akuto finally realized that Keena was naked.

"Wah! Wait a second..."

"Noooo!"

Keena embraced Akuto in order to hide her body.

"You idiot! How can you be so indecent!?" Junko removed the top layer of her uniform and threw it toward Akuto and Keena. She averted her gaze and said, "What are you doing at a time like this!? Do you have any

idea what happened? The god exploded... The god tree that acts as the god's physical form exploded!"

"But you knew I wanted to do that," complained Akuto.

Junko turned around in shock.

"Th-then, this is..."

"Yes. Suhara is gone. Technically, only the data is gone, but this should bring it to everyone's attention that the gods are nothing more than a system. If this changes the world..." Akuto trailed off there. "But I suppose this makes us enemies. I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise after what I said."

Junko blushed.

"Y-you mean...when you said you would...give me the attention I deserve? Y-you do not need to worry about that. I only said what I did because I was in an odd mood..."

"Even if you tell me not to worry about it, I still do. After all, this makes me a complete traitor. You must support the Hattori family, so forget about me and..."

Akuto trailed off again because Junko had suddenly grabbed his hand. Her head was lowered, but her grip was firm.

"D-do not say that. I announced to those in my family that I would cast aside my family for you. So...so..."

Junko raised her head and looked Akuto directly in the eye. Even Akuto could figure out what this meant and he gulped.

However...

"Can I take that to mean you agree with my ideals?" he asked. "I will give you the attention you deserve. I will listen to what you have to say and I will do what I can to ensure you do not lose your position in-..."

Before Akuto could finish, he was hit by the back of the Sword of Sohaya's blade.

"In the end, you couldn't do it, onee-chan," said a voice from behind them.

Yuuko and Hiroshi were walking toward them. Yuuko looked carefree and Hiroshi looked embarrassed.

"Wh-what are you saying, Yuuko!? I was not... Wait, are you okay?"

Junko's expression changed and she turned around.

Yuuko spread her arms wide.

"I'm perfectly fine. I feel even better than before."

She walked up to Akuto and nudged him in the side with her elbow.

"Forget about our family and do something about my sister. Okay, boss?"

Yuuko's tone was a teasing one, but Akuto and Junko were shocked.

"H-hey, are you okay touching him?" asked Junko with her eyes opened wide in surprise.

Yuuko tilted her head in puzzlement.

"What do you mean? He's the one who visited our house, right? You're the one that flew into a rage when he refused your engagement."

"F-flew into a rage...? Anyway, he is the demon king, so..."

The demonic beast mana may have disappeared from her body, but her mental reservations about him would not have disappeared. She might not feel a complete sense of rejection toward him, but she should not have been able to touch him so readily.

However, Yuuko's next words were even more shocking.

"The demon king? Yeah, he died in that explosion. Akuto-san fought as

the academy's public morals officer and managed to defeat him, right? That was so cool. If you don't make your move, I might go for him myself."

Yuuko intentionally provoked Junko with her words and spun around on the spot while grinning. Junko and Hiroshi could only watch on with dumbfounded looks.

"D-does this mean...?"

With a look of realization, Akuto turned toward Keena. However, she only looked up at him with a grin while only wearing a piece of Junko's uniform.

"Akuto-sama! Ahh, you survived! Let us work hard and use this as our first step toward world domination!"

Fujiko's reaction to him had not changed. After secretly returning to the ruined academy, Akuto was being tightly embraced by Fujiko in front of the underground altar which was missing its most important item.

"S-senpai... Please let go. I may not have been aiming for world domination, but this has become very odd," protested Akuto.

"Very odd?"

Akuto explained how it seemed everyone's memories had been altered. This excited the researcher side of Fujiko. Despite still being wrapped

around his arm, she began manipulating a mana screen to gather information.

"This has become very interesting. It is being said that a different demon king began that battle and that he died. From the comments I can see, no one thinks you are the demon king."

"Then I..."

Akuto's face lit up, but Fujiko gave a displeased frown.

"Please do not rejoice! The world finally, finally began to be reformed, but the demon king at the center of it all has been removed from everyone's memories!"

"Even if I am not in the center, the world was still reformed."

The joy of being freed put a huge smile on Akuto's face. It seemed public opinion was beginning to grow in the direction Akuto wanted. People were beginning to think that the gods were only a system and that religious worship allowed unjust control by those in power.

"No! Now is the time to stand up! You still have your power, don't you? Do not worry, Akuto-sama. I will make a proper man out of you! To start with, I will need to get you ready down here."

Fujiko suddenly knocked Akuto to the ground and climbed on top of him.

"Wah! Wait, senpai! You shouldn't-..."

"No, do not restrain yourself. No matter what the world may think, we have a duty to the post-reformation world! One of our duties is to quickly create an heir."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oh ho ho ho ho! Do not be like that. Come on, come on."

Fujiko began groping Akuto's body, but she quickly stopped.

"Stop that."

Someone had punched her from behind. Neither of them had noticed anyone approaching and only one person could punch from a distance.

"This is part of the school. I won't allow any improper relations with the opposite sex."

Lily followed her stretched arm into the underground room.

"President..."

Akuto raised his head.

Lily showed a cynical smile.

"You've done it again. But what kind of trick did you use to alter everyone's memories?"

"I don't know. I can only think it was the work of some great power I am not aware of."

"Hmph. Fine then. This does not change my actions. Although, I should be busy rebuilding the academy for the moment."

Lily began to leave, but her gaze stopped on the altar.

"Hey, where did that jar go?"

Fujiko looked startled by the question. She then made an awkward confession.

"W-well... That rubber monster stole it."

"Is that true?" asked Lily frantically.

Akuto looked puzzled.

"What jar are you talking about?"

"It apparently contained a cultivation of your cells. I hope it won't be

misused...but I doubt we will be that lucky.”

Lily let out a sigh.

Chapter 5: The Foreign Transfer Student

—Now then, it's time for my new life.

Akuto awoke. He had checked the day before, and it seemed most of the students – that is, everyone but Junko, Hiroshi, Keena, and the others – did not remember that Akuto was the demon king. In other words, he had been freed from his previous life.

—My life's goal may have changed, but I still want to study hard so I can reform society from within. Ahh, an oddly worriless morning is a wonderful thing.

“Good morning,” said a voice from a shelf above his head.

Korone had spoken from her standard sleeping spot.

“Good morning. By the way, what happened to your job observing me?”

“The order no longer exists. At this rate, I will become a stray L'Isle-Adam. I could always ask Markt what to do, but sadly, that may mean we must say goodbye,” said Korone plainly.

—I see. So it isn't all good.

“Tell me when you're going to ask. I don't want to have to say goodbye too suddenly.”

"I will. I plan to remain like this for a while. I am the only L'Isle-Adam to notice the large scale data alteration, so I would like to investigate it for a bit."

"Okay, thanks."

Akuto opened his window and looked outside.

"Wow," he said without thinking.

The school building was half destroyed and the schoolyard was filled with holes. On top of that, the remains of the aircraft carrier were still lying around.

"I can definitely tell that fight was no dream."

He opened a mana screen and watched the news. Naturally, they were talking about the incident.

<The demon king who fought so fiercely at Constant Magic Academy went on to destroy the god tree that is the main body of the god Suhara.>

The news reported on the damage done, the effects the destruction of the god would have on the system, and the serious influence that would have on society. But most importantly...

<The demon king was killed in the process.>

—So they really do think that. It looks like this is all over.

Akuto finished changing while filled with a hint of sorrow and a great refreshing feeling. He walked outside and Keena soon ran up to him.

"A-chan, good morning!"

"Good morning."

Akuto nodded and looked toward Keena. She was acting the same as ever.

—It couldn't be...

He had suspected that she might have been the one to cause this. In fact, he was almost certain of it.

"H-hey, about yesterday..."

"Yeah, yesterday was rough!" said Keena innocently.

"Well... Yes, it was. But were you the one that did that?"

"Did what?"

"The changes to everyone's memories."

"That wasn't me. But it was me."

Keena's nonsensical comment left Akuto staring blankly at her.

"Eh? What...?"

"It doesn't matter. Everyone's fine, right? I haven't seen Bouichirou-san since then, but I'm sure he's okay. Ah ha ha."

Keena laughed and Akuto decided that a lot of things really did not matter.

"You're right. Everyone is fine, so it doesn't matter. At the very least, I don't need to think too much about it."

Another voice then called out to them.

"Hey, hurry it up. The dorm students have a health inspection before breakfast because of the turmoil yesterday."

It was Junko.

"Oh, Junko-san, about yesterday..."

"You idiot! Forget everything about yesterday! And why are you calling me Junko-san? Why are you starting to call me by my given name now?"

Junko continued to mutter complaints as she walked away from Akuto and Keena.

"Sorry, Hattori-san," apologized Akuto as he followed her toward the infirmary.

"N-no...um... If you want to use my given name, you can do so. Yes," said Junko without turning around.

"Th-thanks," said Akuto in honest gratitude.

"Y-you idiot. If you are not the demon king, I can approach you honestly. S-so, from now on..."

She trailed off.

"From now on?"

"D-don't make me say it!"

Junko avoided the question and they arrived at the infirmary.

—I see. If I am not the demon king, there is so much more I can do. Leaving the issue of marriage aside, I can at least study with Hattori-san's

family.

As Akuto thought on that, his turn for the medical examination arrived. He only needed to sit in a chair and listen to an artificial spirit speak, so he continued thinking.

—And I won't have to worry about my demon king powers during class. It's sad, but Peterhausen is gone now.

<Demon king.>

—Right, the demon king. With that power gone, I can redo my education and...

<Demon king.>

—Right. And speaking of the demon king... Wait.

Akuto raised his head as he realized everyone around him was muttering amongst themselves.

Everyone was staring at him.

<It has been determined that he will become the demon king. There is no mistaking it. It seems to have been overlooked when he entered the school, but this examination uncovered it,> said the infirmary's artificial spirit, Yatagarasu.

"Th-the demon king!?"



"He's been reborn after a single day?"

"No, he must have been the demon king from the beginning."

"Ahh, and we were friends up until now. Come to think of it, he did have a cruel side to him!"

—W-wait a second!

Akuto's chair clattered as he hurriedly stood up.

The only one looking at him in the same way as before was Keena. For some reason, even Junko looked like she was about to cut him down.

"D-damn you! How many times must you betray me!? If you were not the demon king, I was even thinking I could share everything of myself with you!"

Junko was so worked up that she accidentally exposed how she truly felt.

Naturally, this caused a commotion among the other students.

"What!? He was toying with that straight-laced class rep!?"

"That's a demon king for you! How horrible can he be!?"

—W-wah! No... That isn't it!

"N-no. Please, wait everyone!" Akuto raised his voice. "In this context, the term demon king refers to the one who will destroy the system of

society. You could also say it is another name for a god slayer. And we now know that it means nothing for an individual to be the demon king. Isn't that right?"

Akuto spoke articulately and without hesitation. For that reason, the other students listened to him, but the fact that it was so easy to listen to meant they fully grasped his argument.

One of his classmates asked, "But doesn't this mean you are objecting to the gods' decision?"

"Wait...no... That isn't what I meant. The gods are nothing but a system and they can be used for arbitrary reasons. Even so, I believe using that system is necessary for the sake of the future. However, I must support a path of gradually reducing the number of people using that system."

Akuto frantically tried to smooth things over. However...

"Isn't that the theory held by the black magicians?"

"So that's what he meant when he said it means nothing for an individual to be the demon king. Now that the demon king is dead, he plans to start a terrorist group."

Akuto truly started to panic now.

"No! You are all saying too much when you do not understand what the demon king is. The demon king is a human with modified mana that the gods themselves create so he can kill the gods. That means he is forced

to take actions opposed to the gods, but that does not in itself mean that he must do evil or destroy the system of society!"

"He's started to contradict himself..."

"And isn't he a little too knowledgeable about the demon king?"

—Crap. That information hasn't been made public.

"Please wait! What I ultimately want to say is that the dead demon king has taught us that the gods are an illusion. And that means the demon king himself was an illusion as well. Look at reality! The gods are a system and I, the one telling you this, actually exist in front of you!"

Akuto puffed his chest out with pride.

Silence fell over the infirmary. However, that silence did not come from the crowd being impressed by Akuto's words.

—H-huh?

He looked around to find his classmates completely afraid of him.

"I get it... He's announcing that the demon king never really died."

"If the demon king from yesterday was an illusion... that means he isn't dead!"

—I-I feel like this has happened before.

Akuto felt a cold sweat on his brow.

And...

"Akuto! You always do such unnecessary things!"

Junko had drawn the Sword of Sohaya. It was no longer under the effects of Suhara, but it was still an item of tremendous power. Junko began striking Akuto with the back of that rainbow-glowing sword.

"Wah!"

Akuto blocked with his arms and focused mana in them. Yesterday, that would have been an easy task. However...

"Ee!"

"Eh? W-w-wah!"

Akuto could not control the power leaking from his arms and an explosion burst out.

—N-no... Something is wrong...

The cold looks everyone was giving him hurt. He had half-destroyed the infirmary and the entire school knew about him by this point. He had somehow made it to class, but even Mitsuko-sensei, his homeroom teacher and the school doctor, was giving him a cold look because of the damage to the infirmary.

"Let's see. A demon king has appeared in our class, so I think there will be a bit of confusion for a while. However, he has been allowed to stay in our class because he has yet to do anything evil," said Mitsuko-sensei as if complaining.

"I am the L'Isle-Adam sent as the demon king's observer. Please call me Korone. You may feel as if I was already a part of this class, but that is just your imagination," said Korone while standing beside the teacher's lectern and wearing a school uniform.

Akuto was fed up trying to say anything, so he just lay his head down on his desk.

But then Mitsuko-sensei continued speaking.

"Um, I apologize for interrupting during the confusion of gaining a new friend, but allow me to introduce another transfer student. She is a scholarship student from overseas. Please get along well with her. Come in, Keena-chan."

—A transfer student in the middle of all this confusion? I hope it's someone who won't be too afraid of me... Wait? Keena?

Akuto looked up.

A blonde girl with a cute and innocent smile walked in.

Akuto's eyes were glued to her.

But not because of her looks. A hair decoration with a bird design glittered in her hair.

—Th-that's the hair decoration I gave Keena when I left the orphanage.

Akuto stood up without thinking and the girl's gaze stopped on him.

"I-it's you!"

She ran past the lectern and all the way to Akuto's desk in the very back. She then wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Do you remember your promise from the orphanage? My name is Keena! I've wanted to see you for so long!"

The blonde girl going by the name Keena spoke with a foreign accent.

—Eh? There are two Keenas?

Akuto looked over at the red-haired Keena. She was sitting in her seat and was looking up at Akuto and the blonde Keena with a look of surprise.

“Ahh, I will never let you go, my darling!” said the blonde Keena.

Afterword

Thank you once again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. I enjoy fishing, but lately I have been catching all sorts of fish I don't want. For example, pseudoblennius and half-lined cardinal. I torment the small fish and return them to the ocean. I will definitely never be allowed to go to Ryugu-jo. Of course, maybe it's best not to go there.

This is Volume 5. It is the second half of the two-parter. I would be glad if anyone who does not have Volume 4 would go buy it. If you read Volume 4 after this, you will feel like you have had the story spoiled ahead of time, so be careful. If you picked this up after seeing the cover, please search for Volume 4. It may be right next to this one.

This time, I'll switch things up by starting with the story.

You probably did not understand a lot of what Bouichirou said during his long lines, but you can take that as showing that guys who talk about nonsensical things are not popular with women. Don't ask about the popularity of the person who wrote the lines.

Now, then. This time, we reached a bit of a conclusion. I will not give any details for those who have yet to read the book, but let's just say this series will continue for a while longer. With this one thing and the other thing, there are still things left unresolved and I can think of various things to do from here on. And so next time will be filled with an extra helping of comedy. I think it will get back to being a proper school story and it will of course continue from this novel's ending.

Next, I will introduce the series' expansion into other media.

A drama CD will be released February 25, 2009 by Beatniks Inc. It has a splendid cast with Ono Daisuke-san as Akuto, Nakahara Mai-san as Keena, Shiraishi Ryouko-san as Junko, Chihara Minori-san as Korone, and Makishima Yuki-san as Fujiko. The drama is an alternate version of Volume 1's story and it includes a song by Nakahara Mai-san. That would be more than enough, but a special illustration by Itou Souichi-san is hidden below the CD jacket. Only those who buy the CD can see the illustration. It is quite amazing. In fact, it should be enlarged and printed on some sheets. To be blunt, it is erotic. It is so wonderful that some might even joke about why this illustration is under the jacket. It is a must see.

And Itou-san's manga is of course still running in Champion RED. Make sure to check that out as well.

Anyway, time to chat. The other day, I was eating with my editor and some people were speaking loudly about eroge next to us. I could not believe they were talking about eroge while eating and about a game that was released unfinished at that. I thought about giving them a warning, but I then realized we were eating in Akihabara. I of course did not give them a warning. Recently, that is a place where no one bats an eye at a maid walking around.

Now for my thanks.

First, my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. I went to Comiket, but I wasn't able to meet him because he had already left. And just as I felt I needed to make sure I could greet him next time, I saw a picture in Charano! of a Comiket cosplayer dressed as Keena! That's right. I didn't get to meet the cosplayer at our corporate booth either.

Next, my editor Ohashi-san. This time, the earlier than usual deadline allowed me to evolve and submit my manuscript a little less late than usual! Then again, I think it might have taken me just as long to write. Please stick with me next time, too.

Lastly, I need to thank everyone involved with the Drama CD. Thank you so very much.

Now, the next volume will be #6. As I said before, I will be writing about school events. There's still plenty left to enjoy!



いちばんうれしい
大魔王

ACT6

水城正太郎

水城正太郎 みずきしょうたろう

『東京タロイド』シリーズ（富士見ミステリー文庫）、『せんすいかん』シリーズ（HJ文庫）、『おビーンデー』を経て、現在ライター集団『ん-T E AM』主催、広島カブファンなのですが、最近はお京ベイスターズに詳しくなってきました。本気のファンには申し訳ないが、素直な負けっふりが素直なのです。ノートでも点とられたりして電通みたいに負けるんだぜ！ ひっくりするほどベイスターズ！

伊藤宗一 いとうそういち

兵庫県在住のイラストレーター兼漫画家。一般向けから成年向けまで幅広く活動中。好物は、熱血・筋肉・萌え・エロ・競、く・書。一般はで何という物を描かせんですか！それはさておき、秋田書店様よりコミックス版 れいばんうろの大魔王Ⅱ』発売中です。よろしくお願ひします。

カバーイラスト／伊藤宗一 装丁／西村 大



ISBN978-4-89425-882-2

C0193 ¥619E



定価：本体619円＋税

1920193006193



孤児院にいた頃に阿九斗に髪飾りをもらったという転校生ケーナ・ドロンス。阿九斗の記憶にある少女はけーな？ それともケーナ？ 積極的に阿九斗に迫るケーナとそれに真面目に対応してしまう阿九斗。その様子を見て愕然とする崎子に不二子やけーな、ころねも加わって騒動を巻き起こす。王道学園コメディの本領が発揮されるシリーズ第6巻。

HOBBY JAPAN

水城正太郎 作品

せんすいかん その1

せんすいかん その2

せんすいかん その3

せんすいかん まとめ

いちばんうしろの大魔王

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT3

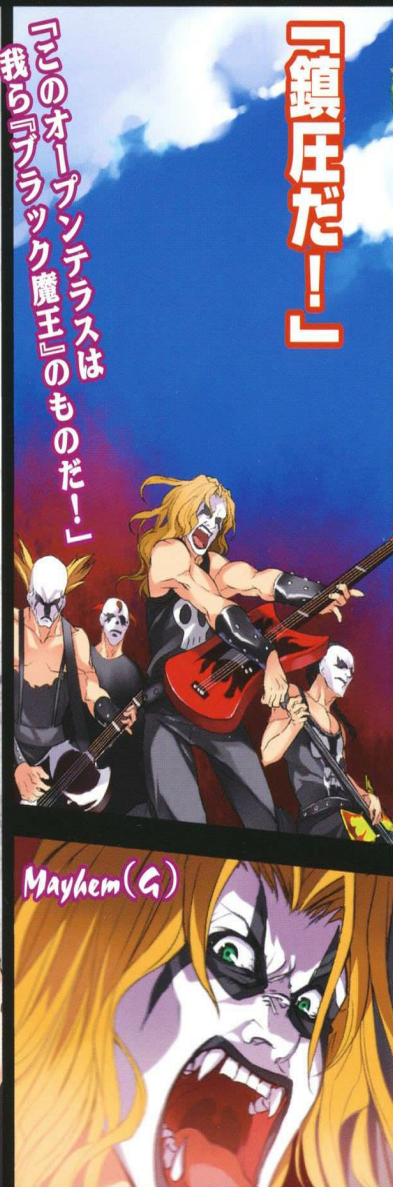
いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT4

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT5

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT6

いちばんうしろ
大魔王
ACT6





「鎮圧だ!」

「このオープンテラスは
我ら『ブラック魔王』のものだ!」



「あれが魔王の実力……」

「アタシのこと、好きになってよ」

「金、金、金!
何かって言えば金だ!」

「私う奴がいるから!」

Baze (Vo) Bathory (G) H. Hammer (Dr) Venom (B)

13 Fri



絢子

「おおおお、お兄さま…」



登場人物紹介

ケーナ・ドロンズ

突然現れたケーナにそっくりな少女。幼い頃、孤児院で阿九斗から髪飾りを受け取ったと主張するが……

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ボシエットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。阿九斗をからかうのが大好き。

お米 昔我けーな

落ちこぼれた天然少女で阿九斗に懐いている。お米が大好き。魔法は苦手だが空を飛ぶことと姿を消すことはできる。

さいあくと 紗伊阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると（再び？）予言された「善良な」主人公。魔王戦争も一段落したところだが彼の困難は続く。

はっとりじゃんこ 服部 絢子

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘で力エルが苦手。



えとろあじこ
江藤不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った
黒魔術師にして薬物使
い。学園のマドンナと
して君臨するが実は陰
謀が大好き。



れいり
リリイ白石

コンスタン魔術学院生
徒会長。帽子がトレー
ドマーク。喧嘩っ早く
「小さい」と言われると
切れてしまう。



みわひろし
三輪寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラ
ブルメイカー。阿九斗の発
言をいちいち誤解し阿九斗
の悪名を高めるのに一役を
買っている。

Prologue

It had been a complete coincidence.

No one had been hoping for it.

Whether they were born naturally or artificially created, every living creature was watched by someone. In most cases, they were welcomed. In a few cases, they were detested. Even so, focus was gathered on them at the moment of their birth.

However, that girl was an exception.

“The scans show that she is human, but there are no past data logs of her,” explained the L’Isle-Adam secretary.

An office filled an entire floor of a high-rise building. Shiraishi Shouji, a priest of the god Megis, irritatedly tapped his finger against a desk at one end of that office.

He had an oddly sharp look to his eyes that made one think he had reckless younger days. He was the father of Lily Shiraishi, Constant Magic Academy’s student council president. As his daughter’s personality would suggest, Shouji’s mischievous behavior was still going strong even as he passed middle age. The other priests referred to him as a loaded bullet or ammunition dump.

Shouji served Megis who was the god of culture, the arts, and

education. The general image people had of the god was a gentle one far removed from Shouji's attitude. The temple was not located in this high-rise building. It was inside a building filled with a cultural atmosphere and surrounded by works of art. Shouji worked behind the scenes, but he had a relatively high position among the priests. He was the official in charge of the education field.

"Why does our sect have to handle this?" asked Shouji.

However, he was well aware of the answer. The secretary gave the exact response he had expected.

"Someone not in the family register is normally treated as an illegal immigrant, but for some reason, that girl has received the baptism of Megis."

"And yet there is no data log of her past."

In that empire, people were baptized by a god as soon as they were born. And that god would then record data on every action they took. If their actions were good, they would be given the blessing of being able to use magic. That was the social service the imperial government provided for its people.

Naturally, the family register was managed differently. Registration of foreigners was managed with a different system from the gods. There were some who refused to be baptized and foreigners would of course not be baptized.

That girl had been found standing alone at the site of the recent demon king war.

According to the knights who had brought her in for protection, she could speak and she knew who she was, but she knew nothing about the land she had been found in.

"However, logs do exist from the moment she appeared standing there," explained the secretary lightly.

"Then are you saying she is an angel that descended from heaven?" asked Shouji jokingly.

However, the secretary nodded.

"Possibly."

"That would be nice. Makes me feel like we've been saved. After all, that would mean they chose our sect."

"Joking aside, you must decide how to deal with this," said the secretary coldly.

"Keh," spat out Shouji. "There's only one way I can deal with this. We have to treat her like a foreigner. You've contacted the Mopha priests, right?"

"We have requested that she be registered as a student from the

United States.”

Mopha was the god of cultural exchange and negotiations.

“I see. In that case, my daughter can handle the rest.”

Shouji adjusted his position in his chair and the chair back shook.

“Your daughter is the academy’s student council president, correct?”

Shouji nodded while looking displeased yet grinning.

“Yes. She does nothing but cause trouble, though. I hear she even got into a fight with the cabinet office during that recent skirmish.”

“I am glad to hear she is doing well. But will this be okay? It seems the black magicians are targeting this girl. There have been several attempts to access the data on her.”

“Rumors sure get out fast. There is a rumor that someone altered the data log, isn’t there? Well, they might be targeting this girl, but we can leave the investigation and observation to my daughter.”

Shouji opened a mana screen on his desk and displayed an image of the girl’s face and her profile.

Her name was Keena Dorons.

"It is not that I do not trust your daughter, but will this be okay? Shouldn't we look after her ourselves?" asked the secretary.

Shouji folded his arms and was unable to keep the irritation off his face.

"We have no clue other than that academy, so we have no other option. But why does she have the memory of being a student at Constant Magic Academy?"

Chapter 1: Chaos Over a Date

“She is a scholarship student from overseas. Please get along well with her.”

That troubled comment came from the class’s homeroom teacher, Torii Mitsuko. She was tall, had unruly hair, wore glasses, and gave off a sociable impression. Her troubled expression came from the resigned feeling she felt due to Class 1-A’s problem student and the strange new student joining it.

The problem student was named Sai Akuto. He was a boy with a mean look in his eyes who sat in a seat at the very back of the classroom. He was perfectly attractive, but he had been born with the look of a clever villain. That look caused plenty of misunderstandings, but that was not the problem. According to a prediction that had never been wrong before, he would become the demon king in the future and he had actually become the demon king once before. Due to various circumstances, he had returned to only being a possible demon king, but those details meant little to his classmates. They saw themselves as sharing a classroom with the one who would destroy the world, so an odd tension was always filling the class.

However, Akuto himself had an introspective and diligent personality. It bothered him terribly that his classmates feared him so much.

—A transfer student? I hope it’s someone who won’t be too afraid of me...

That was Akuto’s earnest thought.

"Okay. Come in, Keena-chan."

On Mitsuko-sensei's instruction, a beautiful girl with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a cheerful, innocent, and cute smile entered the classroom.

Akuto's eyes were glued to her.

But not because of her looks. A hair decoration with a bird design glittered in her hair.

—Th-that's the hair decoration I gave Keena when I left the orphanage.

Akuto stood up without thinking and the girl's gaze stopped on him.

"I-it's you!"

She ran past the lectern and all the way to Akuto's desk in the very back. She then wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Do you remember your promise from the orphanage? My name is Keena! I've wanted to see you for so long!"

The blonde girl going by the name Keena spoke with a foreign accent.

—Eh? There are two Keenas?

Akuto looked over at the red-haired Keena. She was sitting in her seat and was looking up at Akuto and the blonde Keena with a look of surprise.

"Ahh, I will never let you go, my darling!" said the blonde Keena.

It is now necessary to look back into Akuto's memories.

He grew up in an orphanage.

When he left that orphanage, he encountered a girl who he gave a hair decoration that he bought using all of the money he had. And he had promised to meet her again in the future.

The girl with the hair decoration was supposed to be the red-haired Soga Keena. She was his classmate. Those who liked her would describe her as gentle and those who did not would describe her as absentminded. Just looking at her face made one sleepy. She was a strange girl who loved rice and was only skilled at flying and turning invisible.

However, two identical hair decorations were now before Akuto's eyes.

"Wh-why do you have the same hair decoration? And how do you remember what happened in the orphanage?"



Akuto looked back and forth between the two Keenas in confusion. Both of them wore that hair decoration. It had been expensive, but it had definitely been a premade product. For that reason, it was not too surprising for someone to have another one. However...

—Why does she remember the orphanage? Does that mean she's my-...

"Ahh!"

The redheaded Keena suddenly stood up and pointed at the blonde Keena.

Akuto looked nervously over at her.

—Did she just remember something? Did she find something that contradicts what this new girl is saying?

"You have the same name as me!"

The redheaded Keena grinned.

The classmates who knew the circumstances surrounding Akuto and Keena fell from their seats and Akuto mentally held his head in his hands.

—Come to think of it, Keena always said she didn't remember that time in the orphanage no matter how many times I asked.

"Hey, darling. Who is this girl? She is being too familiar," complained the blonde Keena.

"Too familiar? She's your classmate, isn't she? And sorry, but what you are doing could be considered too familiar as well. We only just met," said Akuto.

A sorrowful look appeared on her face.

"Oh! I can't believe it! How sad! How can you say we only just met!? This hair decoration you gave me in the orphanage has been supporting my heart all this time!"

"You mean you were the one crying in the orphanage? I recall that girl having red hair."

"Blonde hair can look red when you are young! Okay, our memories match! You must be my darling!"

The blonde Keena rubbed her face against Akuto's chest.

"S-stop that. Class is about to start."

As Akuto spoke in a troubled voice, another voice spoke up.

"What do you think you are doing in the classroom!? You may be a transfer student, but you are a classmate the instant you enter the classroom. I will make sure you obey our rules!"

The girl who produced that angry shout and stood up was Hattori Junko, the class representative. She had a cool and noble beauty, but the look in her eyes was a bit harsh and her personality was stubborn.

The blonde Keena glanced over at Junko with disagreeableness or even malice in her eyes.

"Darling, is that girl jealous because she is in love with you? Why else would she jeal-at-ous...I mean, yell at us!?"

"I do not want to hear terrible puns from a foreigner! And that is not what I was warning you about! I was saying you have not introduced yourself!"

Junko grew even angrier as she yelled.

"It's definitely jealousy."

The blonde Keena glanced over at Junko and wrapped her arms around Akuto's neck so she could see.

"I-I said that is not it!" denied Junko as she blushed.

Akuto gently removed Keena's arms and spoke decisively.

"That's right. Hattori-san is not jealous."

"Y-yes. B-but...no... You do not have to sound so sure of yourself when you say that..."

Junko grew flustered.

"Come on. Go up front and introduce yourself," urged Akuto.

The blonde Keena nodded, jogged up to the front of the classroom, and energetically raised her hands.

"Hello, everyone from the empire! I am Keena Dorons from the United States! I had heard the empire was a strict hegemony, but it looks like you aren't all bad people. I think I can get along with you just fine!"

The blonde Keena gave a ridiculous greeting.

"So do you know her?" asked Miwa Hiroshi.

He was one of Akuto's few friends. He was a short boy with a mischievous look and he referred to Akuto as "aniki".

"Maybe. To be honest, I don't really know," replied Akuto as they lined up in the dining hall to eat.

"What do you mean you don't really know?"

"Well, even if she is the girl I remember, I only spoke with her that one time. Meeting her again at this age isn't that much different from meeting her for the first time. I'm not sure how much it matters if she really is the girl or not."

"I suppose you're right."

"Yes. And there's something odd about her."

"Something odd?"

"I'm not sure how to say it, but everything about her feels awkward."

As soon as Akuto said that, he heard a voice from one end of the dining hall.

"Oh! So I have to line up here!? Wait, I have to pay? I thought everything in the academy was free!"

It was the blonde Keena's voice.

Akuto could not ignore this, so he stood up. Keena began waving at him when she noticed.

"Darling! Help me! I don't understand the dining hall system!"

"Are you having trouble?"

Akuto walked over to her.

As soon as he did, the dining hall grew noisy. Akuto's face and name were known all across the school. And not in a good way.

The students who had been angry at Keena for cutting in front of them

in line frantically split apart to create a path for him.

—Y’know, it bothers me when you’re that afraid of me.

He complained in his heart, but Akuto had a bad habit of wanting to look his best when in the public eye. He made sure to speak as politely as possible and waved his hands calmly.

“Excuse me. She is from overseas, so she has yet to learn how things work here. It seems she did not bring any money with her.”

The instant he said that, several students pulled money from their wallets and held it out toward Keena.

—Th-that isn’t what I meant...

However, Keena cheerfully took one of the bills held out to her.

“Thank you very much! You should have done this in the first place! Oh, I will have Meal A!”

“Ah...”

Akuto tried to stop her, but Keena had already ordered the meal.

—This isn’t right.

Akuto began to frown without realizing it. The crowd around him grew tense and no one dared move an inch. Those on the other side of the dining hall had already begun fleeing.

Akuto walked over to the student who had given Keena the money.

The poor student's legs were trembling and his expression had stiffened.

"Y-yes!? What do you need!?"

"I was not asking for money, so I will pay you back. I was planning to give this money to her in the first place, so do not worry about it," explained Akuto as he handed the boy a bill.

The student accepted it with a trembling hand.

"Everyone who tried to give her money is an idiot. The demon king is famous for being a lady killer. They got in the way when he was trying to show off."

"Ahh, ahh. He's glaring at that one guy. I think I know who he's going to kill first."

All of the surrounding students began whispering similar comments.

—That is not what I was trying to do...

As Akuto complained silently, Keena began tugging on his hand. She held the bowl for Meal A in one hand.

"Darling, let's go eat over there! This country's food uses so many different dishes! I couldn't believe it! But the contents are much too poor for a member of high society like me!"

The students began whispering once more as they watched Akuto and Keena walk off together.

"Ugh. Why do all the cute girls give in to him?"

"Well, he's the demon king. He's amazing in a lot of different ways."

"I kind of wish I was like him..."

"But I kind of don't want to be like him..."

With his back turned to that envy, Akuto returned to his seat near Hiroshi. He found the redheaded Keena sitting there as well.

"A-chan, Keena-chan is...no, it's weird calling her that. She's Dorons, so... Doro-chan! Doro-chan is with you?"

The redheaded Keena was quickly eating her meal as she spoke. Her meal was Meal K which had been created especially for her after she continually requested it. It came with white rice, deep-fried rice (rice deep-fried in rice flour), rice salad, a spring roll in rice paper, and rice

noodle soup. Basically, it was a special menu made entirely out of white rice. The K of Meal K was said to either stand for Keena or Kome[1]. The other students could order it, but no one else had ever finished that legendary meal.

“She’s only with me because she was causing a commotion over there.”

“I do not understand this academy’s dining hall system! They should explain that kind of thing!” said the blonde Keena as she sat down and began eating her meal.

She had chosen Meal A which was perfectly normal. But after biting into one of fried side dishes and bringing a forkful of white rice to her mouth, she shook her head in disgust.

“Ohh! What is this rice stuff!? How can you eat this!? It is not suitable for a member of high society like me!”

For once, the redheaded Keena actually stood up so quickly her chair clattered.

“That isn’t true! Rice is delicious!”

“It is merely your opinion that it is delicious. It is my opinion that it is disgusting. That is all there is to it!” readily denied the blonde Keena, but the redheaded Keena refused to back down.

“Regardless of what you think of the taste, it has plenty of nutrients. Rice is a whole food! You can survive by eating nothing but it!”

—No, you would get beriberi from a vitamin deficiency.

Akuto kept that comment to himself.

But the blonde Keena vigorously shook her head for an unrelated reason.

“Even if it has nutrients, you can’t just eat one thing all the time! And you have no right to say anything to me about this! I will eat bread instead!”

The blonde Keena stood up and bought a sandwich with what was left of the money she had been given. She placed it on the table and made a loud announcement.

“Man can live by bread alone!”

—What a terribly unspiritual announcement.

Akuto made another internal comment.

But the redheaded Keena vigorously shook her head for an unrelated reason.

“Rice takes 88 steps to prepare!”

The two continued to argue after that while also eating the Meal K and the sandwich.

"By the way, aniki, most of that Meal A is left."

Hiroshi pointed at the bowl the blonde Keena had left. It had been abandoned with only one bite taken out of it.

"We can split it between ourselves."

As the two Keenas argued, the boys ate both their own meals and the Meal A. By the time they put down their chopsticks, Akuto was dragged into the argument.

"I really, super, special, perfectly haven't liked you from the moment I laid eyes on you! You are jealous of me and darling, aren't you!?"

The blonde Keena grabbed onto Akuto's arm.

"I'm not jealous! A-chan and I are sworn friends!"

The redheaded Keena slammed a hand down on the table.

The blonde Keena looked down at the redheaded Keena with a cynical look in her eyes.

"Heh heh. Friends, you say? Then you will sit idly by and watch us go on

a date, right!?"

"A date?"

The redheaded Keena was shocked. The blonde Keena leaned up against Akuto as she glanced over at the other Keena.

"You don't know what a date is? When a guy and a girl want to test if they will make a good boyfriend and girlfriend, they go to a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets! They drink tea together there and become boyfriend and girlfriend if they like each other!"

—Is that really what a date is? Or is that how it works in the United States?

Akuto was skeptical.

"They become boyfriend and girlfriend if they like each other?"

"That's right. How to make your intentions clear is up to the individual, but after the tea, the guy will make his advances on the girl. What happens after that decides it. It is the fork in the road of fate," declared Keena confidently. "Let's go on a date after class the day after tomorrow! I want to go to a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets, that is perfect for a date, and will accelerate romance!"

"Anyway, it seems I've gotten this forced onto me."

After returning to his dorm room after the day's classes, Akuto sought advice from the beautiful girl lying in his bed.

She had soft green hair, her facial features had the perfect beauty of a doll, and she had the beautiful figure of a statue a sculptor made of the ideal girl. However, she was untidily lying on the bed, reading a magazine, and munching on ningyou-yaki from a bag next to her. She was acting more like a middle-aged housewife or an unemployed youth than a beautiful girl.

"Is that so?" said Korone.

She was an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam and she had been sent by the government to act as Akuto's observer because he was predicted to become the demon king.

"Is that all you're going to say?" asked Akuto.

"It is a personal issue, so it does not require my interference. Also, you never told me what you want advice on."

"Oh, you're right. Let's see... It seems whether we become boyfriend and girlfriend is decided afterwards, so I think I will decisively turn her down," declared Akuto.

"That seems too decisive," commented Korone as she looked up from her magazine.

"I don't know her very well. This is something we should talk about after we have known each other as friends for a certain period of time. We mustn't rush it."

Akuto's reasoning was much too serious. This aspect of his personality was one of his virtues and one of his faults.

"Then why not go ahead and tell her so?"

"Dorons-san insisted that she would not hear my answer until after the date."

"That is odd compared to normal human behavior. It is as if she wants to go through a series of steps," analyzed Korone.

"That's why it looks like I have to go through those steps with her. Anyway, I want you to tell me where I can find a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets, that is perfect for a date, and will accelerate romance."

Akuto had an excellent memory.

Korone sat up in the bed and faced Akuto.

"Can't you search the internet yourself?"

"I already tried, but I can't seem to get a feel for it."

Akuto pulled out his student handbook and displayed the cafés he had chosen on its mana screen. They were all refined places marketed towards adults. There was one that became a bar at night, one that insisted on cold-brew coffee, one that served matcha in a tatami mat room and required a membership, and one that used only ornaments from the countries of foreign minorities.

“These are not places to go on a high school date. How did a search leave you with these?”

“I was asked to find a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets, that is perfect for a date, and will accelerate romance. This is what happens when I tried to meet all of those requirements. No, I actually wasn’t able to fit in ‘will accelerate romance’ because it’s too abstract.”

Akuto’s expression was perfectly serious.

Korone stared back at him.

“This is not the first time I have seriously wondered if you are a complete idiot,” she said.

“I know. I have no knowledge or experience in this kind of thing.”

Akuto’s expression grew even more serious.

Korone stared back at him even more.

"I will give you some advice. The standard place for a date is a companion café."

"A companion café?"

Akuto did not seem to understand, so Korone gave a thorough explanation.

"A companion café is a café in which only male and female couples may enter. The seats are divided into small booths where the couple must sit next to each other. They usually have a free self-service drink bar, so they have no waiters. The lights inside are dimmed to the limit so the others in the café cannot see what you are doing."

"Why would-...?"

"It is none of the café's concern if you choose to engage in sexual intercourse there. For those who prefer exhibitionism, there are some cafés that keep the lights fully on and keep the drink bar and playroom separate. Those cafés are often used by married couples who enjoy swapping partners with other couples and showing off their sexual relations to each other. The cafés that allow single men inside are known as happening bars. In some of them, naked women will suddenly appear and ask to have sex. Whether you accept or not is entirely up to you."

With that last comment, Korone pointed at Akuto.

Akuto sighed.

"I see. So you don't want to give a serious answer."

"Of course not. Who would help someone else down the path of love? Especially when it is the boy you love and another woman," said Korone.

"Eh?"

Akuto looked back at her in surprise.

Korone's closed lips formed a flat line. She slowly stuck her tongue out between them like a fax machine. She ended up with her tongue sticking out on an otherwise expressionless face.

"Just kidding."

"I should be used to this after you keep teasing me, but those expressionless jokes are always a shock."

Akuto hung his head down.

Korone raised her arms up high and placed her index fingers on the top of her head to perform the finishing blow. And she remained completely expressionless all the while.

"Just kidding."

The following morning, Keena Dorons continued to follow Akuto around and he continued to rack his brain for a café to choose.

"Have you found a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets, that is perfect for a date, and will accelerate romance yet?"

"Oh, well, no, not yet. But I'll find something."

"I can't have you being good-for-nothing, darling. But I am sure you will find something! No, if you can't find anything, then just order one the commoners around you to do it!"

Keena pointed at their classmates.

Naturally, the students did not look pleased. However, none of them expressed any direct complaints or anger while Akuto was present.

"You shouldn't say things like that," chided Akuto, but Keena did not take him seriously.

"Oh, you are so kind to the commoners, darling."

"That isn't what I meant."

—Is she selfish or just childish?

As he thought on that, he heard another voice.

“Today’s lesson is hands on.”

It was Junko.

“Oh, Hattori-san. I see. So it’s hands on. Dorons-san, what will you do?”

Junko pouted her lips when Akuto said that.

“Is this any time to be worrying about the new student? I am the only one who can handle being your partner, so I need you to focus on doing this well.”

This was an academy for learning magic, so the main part of the classes was the hands on lessons. Some of them were dangerous such as lessons in controlling destructive magic. Akuto always seemed to cause some sort of chaos during these lessons because he simply had too much magic power.

“Understood. I will do my best to make sure you are not harmed.”

Akuto’s comment could have sounded conceited to some, but it was nothing more than Akuto’s bad habit. Nevertheless, Junko blushed.

"Y-you idiot. Do not say it like that."

The blonde Keena had been listening and now she spoke up.

"Hah! Don't make me laugh! There is no way you are fit to be my darling's partner!"

"Why do you keep calling him your darling? I have been lenient with you because you are a foreigner, but I cannot allow that during a hands on magic lesson. Magic is the empire's technology. If you underestimate it, you really will get hurt."

Junko and Keena glared at each other.

"I am not underestimating magic. If my darling and I are together, everything will be fine!"

"That is what I mean by underestimating it. The empire's technology is-
..."

"I had heard this place was nationalistic and xenophobic and it looks like that was spot on!"

"What? Fine then. Just try being his partner and get blown away! You can regret your own foolishness afterwards."

Junko angrily stalked off.

—What am I supposed to do?

Akuto was troubled, but the lesson began regardless.

The lesson involved performing precise work with telekinesis. They learned how to use magic to control small objects and move them on a millimeter scale.

“We only have so many micrometers and sets of objects, so form groups of two. Once you can do it on your own, try to do it while working together,” said Mitsuko-sensei. She then added, “Sai-kun, you work far away from everyone else. You don’t have to work with a partner either.”

The other students stood in front of some blocks of various sizes placed on the classroom’s desks, but Mitsuko-sensei pointed toward a single desk in the middle of the schoolyard.

“Well, I knew this was going to happen.”

Akuto obediently made his way out into the schoolyard, but the blonde Keena followed him.

“Darling, let’s do our best!”

“Eh? But the teacher told me to do it on my own. You don’t have to force yourself to work with me. You don’t have to worry about what the class rep said either.”

"Don't worry. We can do it if we work together!"

Keena ran ahead and dragged Akuto to the center of the schoolyard.

"You shouldn't take this so lightly. I'm especially bad at this kind of detailed work. I feel like an idiot saying it like this, but it's like using a missile to open a can. C'mon, go back with everyone else."

He looked back toward the classroom window. Unsurprisingly, Mitsuko-sensei and their classmates were telling Keena to come back.

But Keena laughed it off.

"Ah ha ha. It won't be a problem. We just have to show them the strength of our bonds!"

Keena took Akuto's hand and guided it toward the blocks sitting on the desk.

"Again: you can't do-..."

Akuto trailed off and fell silent when he felt warmth fill the arm Keena was holding.

—What? My power is...

"See, it's completely fine!"

Keena smiled at Akuto.

Akuto had of course not intended to use any power. However, a narrow stream of mana appeared at the end of the hand Keena was holding.

Mana was scattered throughout the atmosphere. When it responded to the mana inside one's body, it could act on objects. That was why mana was harder to control the greater the amount of mana in one's body.

Also, it was exceedingly difficult to interfere with the mana in someone else's body. One's internal mana had inherent mana waves that only resonated with the brainwaves of that person.

—She's resonating with my mana waves?

He could think of no other possibility. Keena was manipulating the mana within his body and controlling it perfectly.

Akuto's surprise reached his classmates back in the classroom.

Mitsuko-sensei had displayed footage of them on a mana screen in the classroom. That footage showed the small blocks on the desk being controlled perfectly. The smallest blocks were inside a clear plastic box and were cubes almost as small as the particles making up a powder, but they systematically stacked them up to form a wall.

"What!? Impossible!" cried Junko.

"The new student from overseas?" asked Etou Fujiko.

On the surface, she was the academy's greatest beauty, had grades at the top of the academy, worked as the girls' dormitory leader, and was admired by both boys and girls alike. In secret, she was a black magic adherent who adored Akuto.

Sitting before her was Lily Shiraishi, the student council president and one of the few people who knew her true identity. Lily had called Fujiko to the student council room.

"Yes. That is what she is officially being called, but her true identity is not actually known," explained Lily as she toyed with the brim of her stylish hat.

"Her identity is not known? That sounds dangerous. For one thing, how can one's identity not be known in this empire? If you wish to discuss paranormal phenomena, can it wait until some other time?" replied Fujiko disinterestedly.

Noticing her disinterest, Lily called up a mana screen on her desk that showed the previous lesson.

"As you can see from this, she seems to have some connection to Sai Akuto."

The screen showed the blonde Keena helping Akuto perform detailed

mana operations.

"Wh-what!?"

Fujiko gulped.

"That's right. I do not know how, but she is successfully controlling Sai Akuto's mana. This means..."

Before Lily could continue her explanation, Fujiko cut her off.

"She is touching my Akuto-sama's hand so familiarly!"

Fujiko grew enraged, her hair bristled, and she banged on Lily's desk.

Lily was of course taken aback.

"...Um, that isn't the important part."

"Ah! Ho ho... Oh ho ho ho! I was joking, of course! Yes, this is most interesting!"

Fujiko tried to laugh it off, but after a bit, she seemed to realize the importance of what she was seeing. She turned a serious look in Lily's direction.

"You said her identity is unknown?"

"Yes. It seems she just suddenly appeared. And she was found at the site of that battle."

"That battle" referred to the war in which Akuto became the demon king and slew the god Suhara. However, Akuto's presence had been eliminated from most people's memories and they now thought the "previous" demon king had killed Suhara.

"In that case, she might be related to the existence that erased that from everyone's memories," said Fujiko as she folded her arms.

"Exactly. She might be related to the existence known as the Law of Identity. That mysterious will that most likely appears through Soga Keena's body."

"Did you call me here to determine who this new student is?" asked Fujiko.

Lily shook her head.

"No. There are some things we cannot know even if we investigate. We have no clues whatsoever. I just wanted to make sure you were not behind this."

Lily looked at Fujiko with defiant eyes.

Fujiko frowned in displeasure, but she understood what Lily truly

meant.

"You may doubt me, but this has nothing at all to do with Akuto-sama's cells I cultivated or with my mana wave research using them. I am embarrassed to admit it, but that the jar was stolen from me just before that battle came to an end."

"By that rubber man?"

Lily looked surprised.

Fujiko nodded.

Lily clicked her tongue.

"Then did they use that to...? No, the timing doesn't fit," muttered Lily before waving a hand. "Understood. Thanks. Sorry about calling you here."

"Think nothing of it. I received valuable information about this new student."

"Are you going to investigate her? Well, try to keep things from getting out of hand."

"No, it has merely given me the desire to fight."

Fujiko laughed with a cruel look on her face.

Junko was suddenly called out to after school.

"Hattori-san, there is something I want to ask you."

"Something you want to ask me?" she repeated before realizing who had spoken to her.

It was Akuto.

Keena Dorons had been constantly following him around since the day before, but she was gone. She must have returned to the dorm after school.

"It is not often you wish to consult with me," said Junko before clearing her throat.

She had grown tense once she realized what the situation was.

The two of them were alone in the evening hallway.

She recalled that she had announced she would stay with Akuto even if it meant disobeying her family during that war and she had told Akuto as such.

"S-so what is it?" asked Junko while facing the setting sun to hide her blushing face.

"I was wondering if you knew a good café for a date," said Akuto casually.

"A-a date?"

Junko turned around in surprise.

"Yes. I don't know what kind of café to choose. I asked Korone, but she only gave me strange answers."

"I-I-I-I see."

Junko was horribly flustered.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-yes, I am fine. N-now, then... There is place near the station that is... No, that is not a good place for a date. Leave the station, turn right, and continue for a while. Continue out of the shopping district and into the residential district and there is an open terrace café. It is owned by a pastry chef, so you can buy cakes at the neighboring store."

As Junko explained, Akuto nodded in satisfaction.

"That sounds good."

"It would be best to reserve a table the day before. B-by the way, when were you planning to have this date?"

"Tomorrow."

"T-tomorrow. I see."

—That is very sudden. What do I do? Should I buy some new clothes? No, it would seem odd if I went that far. I need to keep this casual. But he is the one inviting me on the date, so this has an almost 100% chance of being fine. I do not need to worry too much and there will be no problems. But he might think I would go on a date with just anyone if I accept too readily. I can't let him remain completely in control. I know. I can pretend I have plans and act a bit reluctant. It wouldn't be bad to look a bit troubled.

As Junko made up her jumbled mind, she turned away and spoke.

"I have some plans tomorrow...but I suppose it isn't anything too important. I told my little sister I would go see her concert. But if you insist...I can give you priority. After all, my sister is doing things like that all the time. Ha ha... Ha ha..."

But she had spoken so quietly that Akuto had not heard her.

"Thanks so much. Dorons-san said she wanted to go to a high society, LOHAS, lovely, and refreshing café where you can eat sweets, that is

perfect for a date, and will accelerate romance," he said with an innocent smile.

Junko instantly froze as if she had been thrown into a world of eternal winter.

"W-wait a second. This date is with that new student?"

Akuto nodded innocently and said, "Yes. She asked, so I figured I could go drink some tea with her."

"W-wait... Wait just a second... Are you telling me you are going on a date with that new student...and just because she asked?"

"Well, yes. It would be odd to refuse her, don't you think? And it seems dates are treated a lot less seriously in the United States."

"I-I see... So that's it. Ha. Ha ha. Ha ha ha."

"A-are you okay? You don't look very good."

Akuto was worried, but Junko was too busy staggering and going pale from shock.

—I-I see... Why did I never think of that? I just had to ask and he would have gone on a date... That's right. He is that kind of guy, isn't he?

"An observation target made a reservation at a café? What is the café's name? Café Bakhtin? When is the reservation?"

A local knight leader carried out telepathic communications with a tense look. He immediately entered the information into a handbook.

A tense atmosphere quickly filled the knight station. Twenty skilled knights were on duty, but they all stood up and watched their leader's expression.

"Understood. We will do our best to police the area."

After ending the telepathic connection, the knight leader glanced across his men's faces. Those faces held a mixture of expectation and fear. He spoke to them resolutely.

"We have word from the cabinet office. The boy who is a possible demon king will use Café Bakhtin in District 2 tomorrow at 3 PM. We must do our best to keep the people safe!"

"Ohhhh!" cheered his men.

Korone was not slacking on her duties as observer. She was providing detailed reports to the government on Akuto's actions. And when he made any kind of major action, the report would immediately be sent to this knight station in the same city as Constant Magic Academy.

But as an orphan with no home to return to, Akuto rarely entered that city. For that reason, this was their first large scale operation.

“Contact Café Bakhtin! Have our female members slip in as waitresses! Ask to have them trained in waiting tables by noon tomorrow! We will go with defense plan 1B! Keep your armor at a level low enough to not concern the people! Don’t forget to request cooperation from the neighboring knight stations! And most importantly, do not allow the people to be hurt!” roared the knight leader.

The knights called up maps onto the mana screens in the station and began to add red pointers on them.

He did not know it yet, but the following day would contain the longest afternoon that knight leader had ever experienced.

“Um, senpai, you don’t have to go this far.”

Akuto felt bad for everything Fujiko was doing for him.



The mirror in front of him showed him in a casual outfit. Unlike when he chose clothes for himself, they were coordinated and he was even wearing accessories. The outfit had been selected by Fujiko. He did not own very many clothes, but Fujiko had changed his appearance quite a bit with the combination she had selected.

"No, the demon king I adore must always look magnificent. Ho ho ho."

Fujiko laughed and fixed Akuto's collar. She then styled his hair with wax.

Fujiko had borrowed the home economics room to help Akuto change into his casual outfit. The two of them were quite tall, so they looked like models. A large number of female students and a few male students had gathered outside the window to watch them.

"Ahh, Fujiko-sama is so beautiful..."

"But why is she so attached to the demon king?"

"I hate to admit it, but he is good looking. If only he wasn't the demon king."

"No, this would be unforgivable even if he wasn't the demon king!"

"That's right! He's stolen our Fujiko-sama!"

"But there's no way we can beat him in a fight."

The students continued to give similar comments.

While watching those students out of the corner of her eye, Fujiko saw Akuto off in his new perfect outfit.

"Finished. Have a good time."

Fujiko smiled kindly and Akuto bowed to her and left the home economics room. He was secretly suspicious of her out-of-the-ordinary attitude. He could not imagine she would let him get even remotely close to another girl.

Akuto's fears were of course warranted. After watching him turn the corner of the hallway, Fujiko quickly cleaned up the home economics room and began pursuing Akuto.

"Yes. I am not about to just let you go on your date. If the girl was not that new student with such a strange mystery surrounding her, I would have immediately sent her to hell."

An evil grin appeared on Fujiko's lips as soon as she was out of view of the surrounding students.

"Yes, I want to confirm some things about this mysterious new student as well," said a sudden voice.

Korone had appeared behind Fujiko at some point.

"Wh-when did you get behind me?"

"Is your back that valuable? And it is completely normal for an observer to follow her observation target."

Korone seemed intent to enter the city. She was wearing casual clothes for once.

"It is a bother, but I suppose I have no choice," complained Fujiko.

She began tailing Akuto along with Korone.

And as Akuto left through the school's main gate, Fujiko chanced upon another pursuer.

"S-senpai! Why are you here?" asked a flustered Junko when she saw Fujiko.

"That is what I would like to ask you. However, I get the feeling our reasons are the same."

Junko was of course in casual clothes as well.

This made three pursuers.

Akuto met Keena Dorons in front of the school's main gate. Keena was wearing a lively outfit in the style of the United States.

"I see. If she is that sporty, maybe I should have held back on the luxurious side of things."

Fujiko regretted her own coordination. Seeing that, Junko grew

suspicious.

"Senpai, why are you so calm? This is not how you would normally react."

"Ho ho ho. I would never freely let Akuto-sama have a date. The necklace I lent him has magic built in. When those around it consume caffeine, they lose all self-restraint as if they have been drinking alcohol. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it has the same effects as a truth serum. This will allow us to know who this new student really is! Heh heh heh," laughed Fujiko.

Junko could not help but take a step back from Fujiko.

"Y-you scare me... So at the worst, she will act like a drunk and make Akuto hate her. And if it works, we will know her identity."

"Exactly. Also, Akuto-sama's bracelet has magic built in that defends against those effects. He will not be affected by the necklace at all!" announced Fujiko in satisfaction.

"This is obviously the pattern where your scheme fails and causes great confusion," muttered Korone. "That always happens when one relies on secret tools. Isn't that common knowledge?"

"That is not common knowledge at all!" shouted Fujiko angrily.

Junko held her head in her hands.

"Ahh, why did I come here? If I had known this would happen, I would have gone to Yuuko's concert."

Junko's younger sister Yuuko was announcing a new song at a department store as the idol Hoshino Yuri, but that had no bearing on what would soon occur.

<The target has passed by the station.>

A man in a suit with an expectant look saw Akuto and Keena Dorons pass the station. He was a knight in disguise, so he immediately contacted the other knights.

Other knights dressed as a housewife, a delivery boy, and someone walking their dog also informed the others where Akuto was.

However, the knights were not the only ones on edge.

"I-is that-...?"

"He's that rumored academy student..."

The people of the city knew what Akuto looked like thanks to the other students at Constant Magic Academy. The knights had not warned of Akuto's arrival, so in the eyes of the townspeople, the demon king had suddenly appeared.

Shutters began to close over shops and mothers tugged their children's hands as they ran away. Only the disguised knights were left on the streets.

<Not good. The people know more about the demon king than we thought!>

<Is that why!? We just received advance notice of a crime! Demon king worshipers are entering the city to come into contact with the target!>

<Can we hold them back?>

<We are cordoning off the area! But these worshipers are normal people! We need some countermeasure in case they break through!>

The knights' communications line was very noisy.

Akuto had of course noticed something was odd.

—Oh, no. Does everyone in the city know me, too? I need to avoid coming here much.

The closing shutters hurt Akuto.

"Why are the shops closing? There was so much I wanted you to buy

me!" complained Keena.

"Well, they have their reasons. But I don't have very much money, so I couldn't buy you anything expensive even if the shops were open."

"There's a bank over there! Banks have money, right?"

"They do, but not for me."

Akuto shrugged.

"C'mon, you can just go get a little!"

<The target is plotting to rob a bank!>

<Send knights to the bank immediately!>

<Hurry! If the target enters the bank, you have permission to use your weapons!>

"You shouldn't make it sound like I would rob a bank. You need to have more class."

Akuto shook his head.

"Then how do you get money?" asked Keena in confusion.

—It's like she has no knowledge about the world at all.

Akuto was surprised. He decided to give her a thorough explanation.

"Normally, you work. If you are not going to work, you need some capital to begin with. Then you can buy and trade stocks. In other words, you obtain the right to manage a company. If you manage it well and it grows, you can sell the company. That's more or less it."

"Oh! I don't really get it! It sounds hard!"

Keena held her head in her hands.

"It is, but I want to participate in society to the point that I can tell companies what to do."

<He might have already bought some stocks! Get the fund people to help us! Have them search their customers for the demon king!>

<That girl with the demon king is from the United States! Check for a line to foreign money laundering!>

While spreading unexpected confusion behind them, Akuto and Keena arrived at Café Bakhtin.

"Welcome," said the café owner with a bow.

The owner was real, but all of the waitresses and customers behind him were disguised knights.

"Oh, good. This place is still open."

Akuto saw Keena to her seat and glanced around the café. An odd tension hung over it.

—I get the feeling we're being monitored.

Akuto silently swore to remain on his best behavior.

Meanwhile, the three pursuing Akuto hid on the road opposite the café.

They sipped at drink cans while watching Akuto and Keena.

"We really are pathetic to be spying on someone else's date."

"We are only stopping for a drink. But keep watching. This will eventually transform into a disastrous scene. Heh heh heh."

Junko and Fujiko were whispering to each other.

While the two of them were enveloped by a grim atmosphere, Korone looked carefree.

"Oh, things appear to be going well."

Despite being expressionless, Korone's voice held an odd sense of excitement. She ate ningyou-yaki from a bag she had brought with her. She was in full spectator mode.

"You certainly sound carefree. Do you enjoy spying on people's dates that much?" complained Fujiko.

"A bit," said Korone with a nod.

Korone had said things were going well and the two of them did indeed look like a nice couple.

Akuto had sworn not to cause any trouble and he was showing almost oddly perfect consideration for both Keena and those around them.

As an orphan, Akuto had worked to earn the money needed to transfer to the academy, so he was well-versed in the ways of the world. They made their orders while Akuto steered the conversation such that Keena would not do anything too odd due to her lack of knowledge. He had worked in restaurants before, so he understood exactly what items would

be a bother to quickly make. He made sure to avoid such things when making his order. He of course made sure Keena did not realize he had changed her initial ridiculous order.

Akuto could be this considerate if he put his mind to it. The reason he did not normally do so was his complete obliviousness to how girls' hearts worked. And his ability to act this way when needed caused misunderstandings when he did not. His attitude was currently causing Keena to grow a bit flushed.

He selected sweets to perfectly match the current mood and selected a black tea based on the description of which one would match the flavor. He handled the menus and plates carefully and was polite to the waitress. As was the custom in the empire, he smiled and spoke of educational matters after ordering. It would have been hard to find someone who would not misunderstand his intentions.

"H-he has never treated me th-that kindly!"

Fujiko bit her handkerchief.

"N-no, senpai! If you make a misunderstanding here, it is all over! This is just how he is! I have made the same mistake countless times!"

Junko was oddly used to being deceived.

"At any rate, this should get interesting once the coffee arrives. Heh heh heh heh heh."

A laugh escaped Korone's expressionless mouth.

A waitress who was feigning calm but was clearly nervous carried the black tea and cakes to them on a tray.

<The target is behaving well. Are you sure he is not using the café normally?>

The female knight playing the role of a waitress secretly sent a telepathic communication. However, the knight leader immediately denied the possibility.

<Do not let your guard down. The historical demon kings always behaved gentlemanly. This does not mean he does not have a hidden scheme.>

"And here is your small blueberry pie."

The waitress placed the cakes and tea in front of Akuto and Keena.

"I would expect nothing less of you, darling. You found a high society, luxurious, economical café that is perfect for me and you chose the perfect sweets to match!"

Keena was in an excellent mood.

"Yes, but I didn't actually choose the café."

"Don't worry! It doesn't change the fact that you are the best, darling!"

Keena's mood improved further as she took a bite of the cake.

"This uses excellent wheat!"

"I'm glad. I can't comment on the wheat, but it does taste good."

Akuto nodded and took a sip of the tea.

His necklace and bracelet gave off a dull light.

Keena then brought her own teacup to her mouth.

"Here it comes!"

"This is it!"

"She drank it."

Fujiko, Junko, and Korone all spoke at once.

If the magic took effect, Keena would be in a state similar to having taken a truth serum. And the three of them saw that exact change come over her.

"Hey, darling. There is something I didn't tell you."

Keena placed her cup down and spoke in a gloomy tone that was the exact opposite of her previous cheerful one.

She cast her eyes down and placed her hands on her lap. Akuto did not know what to make of her unusual behavior.

"Wh-what is it?"

"The truth is...I have no memories."

Akuto was confused by the sudden confession.

"Eh?"



"I don't know when I was born or how I got here."

Keena covered her face and started to cry.

"Wait a second. What are you saying?"

"I'm sorry about crying all of a sudden. But it's true. It has to be true... and it makes me so sad..."

"When you say you have no memories, do you mean you have amnesia?" asked Akuto.

Keena shook her head.

"No, not that. I think I was suddenly born. I can tell."

"Eh? Then your memories of me in the orphanage..."

Keena violently shook her head.

"No! That's real. That's a real memory! But that's all I have. I have no other memories!"

Even someone as dense as Akuto suspected this was related to his magic power or to the existence known as the Law of Identity.

But what mattered more was that a girl was crying in front of him.

"I was so worried before I met you. I knew nothing about this world and I was wandering alone... People from the government took me in and I finally made it to you."

Keena continued her tear-filled confession.

Her words rang heavily and directly in Akuto's heart.

He was an orphan, so he felt he understood the sadness of not knowing your own past.

"It's okay. Even if you know nothing but me, I will teach you all sorts of things from now on," said Akuto.

"I-is she the type that starts crying when she drinks? And didn't the atmosphere there grow a bit odd?"

Junko panicked.

"Ahh! Akuto-sama is being so kind to her! I am the only one he is allowed to be kind to!"

Fujiko ripped her handkerchief apart.

"More importantly, I think Keena Dorons just casually made an important statement about her identity," said Korone, but the other two were not listening.

"Akuto, do you love me?"

Keena raised her head and looked at Akuto with teary eyes.

"Eh?"

Akuto froze in place.

He knew he had to take this question seriously.

From Keena's past actions, he could tell she was like a pure child.

"I think you feel this way about me because I am the only person in your memories."

"That is not what I want to hear! Give me a proper answer!"

Keena began crying again.

At the same time, the mana surrounding Akuto stirred.

Akuto's hand moved against his wishes.

—Eh?

Akuto was shocked. He had not tried to, but his hand slowly moved forward.

—My hand is moving on its own?

Akuto's hand gently placed itself on top of Keena's head. She looked up in surprise.

—So is Dorons-san not controlling it?

Akuto was surprised by Keena's surprise, but his hand was clearly moving in a convenient manner for Keena. His hand moved down and brushed her cheek to wipe away her tears.

In that instant, they looked like lovers who had promised their futures to each other.

"Th-this is going too far! I-I-I will cut him down! I will kill him and then myself!"

In her confusion, Junko tried to draw the short sword she had hidden on her.

Korone tilted her head and stopped Junko with the toy reacher she had pulled out from somewhere.

"An odd mana flow is coming from Keena Dorons... Those two are not listening at all."

Fujiko was bristling with her face transformed into something like a

hannya mask.

“Kiiiii! This is not going as planned! But just in case, I added a device to the necklace that alters its output! If I max its output, Dorons will be completely drunk! She will make a complete fool of herself! And she will truly shame herself if she wets herself! Heh heh heh... Hah hah hah hah!”

“I have no idea what is even happening anymore,” said Korone calmly, but she made no attempt to stop Fujiko.

“Take this!” said Fujiko as she maximized the volume on the control device she had pulled out.

The effects immediately showed themselves.

<Something is happening with the target. The girl is crying! Is she being threatened by the demon king?>

<No. From what I heard of the conversation, it might be a simple dispute.>

As the knights discussed the situation, the ones located in the café suddenly began to act oddly.

<I’m sorry... We may be in the middle of a mission, but I’m not feeling very good.>

<No, wait. Neither am I. Is this some kind of magic?>

The knights playing customers all complained of feeling unwell. They all began carelessly leaning back in their seats as if they could not withstand it anymore. Some even lay down on their table.

Over the long time the ones playing customers had been there, they had drunk a few cups of coffee each. The effects of Fujiko's magic hit them hard.

"I'm sorry... There's something I have to tell you." One of the knights began speaking out loud rather than over the telepathic communications. "I've been sleeping with your wife!"

It was a shocking confession and he had shouted it loud enough to be heard all across the café.

This was of course due to the magic in Akuto's necklace.

The knight being spoken to was completely drunk, but his mouth still fell open at that tremendous shock. Nevertheless, when he actually spoke, it was something unrelated and equally as shocking.

"I've been embezzling equipment costs from our knight station for five years! I've taken a total of 10 million! And I've used it to buy gifts for Takayanagi, the receptionist!"

"Now you've done it," said Korone oddly calmly.

"N-not good! The device should not have had this much output.... They must have consumed a lot of caffeine."

Fujiko frantically fiddled with her device to lower the output.

However...

The knob broke off.

"Ah."

"And there is the expected turn of events. All is right with the world," said Korone as if she were not involved.

Fujiko stared blankly forward with the broken device in hand.

"Senpai, we can only see what happens now. If this reveals corruption within the knights, it is not all bad."

Junko seemed to have come to a realization because she began speaking positively.

"Th-that is right. At any rate, Dorons has almost passed out."

Fujiko accepted the situation as if to abandon all responsibility.

"And in exchange, you have invited in chaos."

An expressionless laugh escaped the corner of Korone's mouth.

The open terrace café was fallen into chaos.

"You son of a bitch! She's my wife!"

"So!? You have no room to talk with how useless you are! Katsuko-san was crying!"

"Don't you dare talk about my family problems! I'll blow you away! Special Knight Attack – Volcano Eruption!"

"Shut up! You'll be the one crying when I'm done with you! Sword Tornado!"

One end of the terrace was blown away. The two knights' magic had collided.

The knight leader naturally gave frantic orders as he listened in via telepathic communication.

<Calm down! You are on duty! Forget everything anyone says until this mission is over!>

"Are you saying we should overlook embezzlement!?"

One knight was red in the face and unable to hold back his sense of justice. He approached the knight who had confessed to the embezzlement.

"It's that greedy woman's fault! Money, money, money! It's always about money with her!"

"That's because someone's willing to pay!"

The two knights drew the electromagnetic swords they used in cities and clashed. The tables around them were blown away in every direction.

"Wah!"

Akuto placed his body over Keena to protect her.

A chair struck his back, but that was no problem for him.

—But...

Akuto could not decide how to resolve the situation. He was willing to bet this was being caused by something Fujiko had set up, but he could not put together a countermeasure without knowing the details.

—I could run...but then the knights would chase after me.

That meant he could not move from where he was.

He glanced around. The drunk knights were violently fighting each other, so the other knights would surely arrive soon.

But they did not.

—Why aren't they trying to stop this?

<They got through a gap! A group of demon king worshipers breached the cordon!>

<You fools! How did that happen!?!>

<We were negligent in our duties after the confessions of embezzlement and other dangerous things!>

The knight leader held his head in his hands as he received more and more reports from the scene.

<Adultery is nothing! I know about the knight leader's illegitimate child!>

<The cover up of one of the captain's crimes is pretty amazing, too!>

The revelations continued to come from Café Bakhtin. As long as one followed the rules of one's religion, one's magic power would not be reduced. And to protect people's human rights, it was forbidden to view another's life log without proof of a crime. Even so, the knight leader hung his head down in shock at all the crimes and near-crimes being committed. Even one of his secrets had been exposed.

<I-I only told you about my child because I thought I could trust you... No, that doesn't matter! Hurry up and capture the demon king worshipers!>

<B-but...>

<What is it?>

<The people of the city have noticed the commotion and have gathered in protest around Café Bakhtin!>

<Stop them! Keep them at a distance!> cried the knight leader.

Akuto felt like he was looking into hell itself.

Keena was crying like a child in his arms.

Nearby, the drunks were confessing the secrets of the knights while

taking part in a large brawl using magic.

Beyond them, the owner of Café Bakhtin was half in a frenzy trying to stop the destruction of his café.

The knights who were not drunk were running by outside the café. Townspeople with anger in their eyes were marching toward them.

—I only came here to go on a date...

A strange noise and a cloud of dust were approaching from beyond the group of townspeople.

—What is with this atmosphere? The war from the other day was more comfortable than this.

Akuto complained in his heart.

“Wh-what is this odd noise?”

Junko looked left and right.

She could not see far. The three girls were already within the crowd of townspeople. The people had gathered in anger over the knights' revealed scandals and their current violence. Naturally, a lot of the people were simply onlookers, but they still created a great pressure around the café.

Some strange noise was coming from behind the crowd. It was a bizarre noise that was not quite intense music and not quite a complete din.

"My analysis of the waveform says it is coming from musical instruments."

Korone held a hand to her ear and analyzed the sound.

"Why would onlookers be carrying instruments with them?"

Junko looked over in surprise.

At the same time, the sound suddenly grew louder.

With a roar that hurt her ears, the line of townspeople split in two. The people held their ears and tried to run away from the noise.

"Wh-what is that?"

Junko's mouth fell open.

Some men in bizarre outfits appeared beyond that line of people.

There were five of them in all. They were all wearing black leather. They wore leather belts and black shirts over bare skin. The silver skull

accessories and steel studs seemed to be their trademark.

But if that was all, it would not have been all that strange. All of their faces were painted white with black makeup on top of it. Their lips and the area around their eyes were dyed black and they scattered creepiness around them. They also had spells written in a magic language on their faces.

The five of them were holding instruments. They were a band with two guitar players. The vocalist who had long black hair let out a cry.

"You stand before the demon king! Bow your heads, you commoners!"

"Wha-!?"

Junko was utterly shocked and she looked over at Korone.

"They are demon king worshipers. Bands like this are known as black metal bands. Their extreme lyrics praise the demon king. They also dress like that as a type of fashion, but..."

Fujiko interrupted Korone's explanation.

"Th-that is the radical black metal band, Black Demon King!"

"You know them, senpai? That name is so pathetic I would expect to hear it at a dog race," commented Junko in shock.

However, Fujiko argued back with a serious expression.

"No, do not be led astray by the name! Black Demon King is not a band that does this for the fashion. Each of them is a true member of a black magic circle and they have all cast aside their baptism. Their leader even has a criminal record. They are a true black metal band that has only ever lost members due to them being arrested or being assassinated due to infighting between black magicians!"

"Geh... Is that true?"

"Yes. I still need to use magic, so not even I have cast aside my baptism. However, a true black magician will be so impatient for the demon king's arrival, that they will cast aside their baptism even if it means they are no longer able to use magic!"

"So..."

"Yes. Ever since that demon king war, the black magicians can use magic. That and the defeat of Suhara has brought their demon king worship to its max!" declared Fujiko. "Max!"

Peterhausen had functioned as a god for the black magicians. He had died, but it seemed he had activated some subsystem somewhere before falling into his slumber. Ever since, the unbaptized black magicians had continued to use illegal magic.

"So did they come here to meet the demon king?"

Black Demon King cut through the crowd and approached Café Bakhtin.

Their mana-driven instruments played in harmony. Their representative song, Triumphant Return of the Demon King, was playing loudly.

The knights tried to stop them, but they could not use magic for fear of harming the townspeople. The knights were quickly pushed back by a gathering of gothic lolita girls who were fans of Black Demon King.

<Stop them!>

The knight leader tried to give an order, but it was meaningless by that time.

Black Demon King spread out in front of the open terrace of Café Bakhtin. They had brought a drum set, so their preparations were complete. The vocalist bowed deeply toward Akuto.

"It is an honor to have an audience with the great demon king."

At that time, Akuto sat in a chair in the center of the open terrace and Keena Dorons was sitting on his lap.

From an outside perspective, he appeared to be calmly observing the surrounding chaos.

But in reality, Akuto was too preoccupied to focus on his surroundings.

A strange change had come over Keena. She seemed to be drunk, but she was also horribly cold to the touch. She almost felt frozen. This troubled Akuto so much he had picked her up and placed her on his lap.

"A-are you okay?" asked Akuto.

"Yes. I'm not in any pain. But..." replied Keena in a quiet voice.

She looked up at Akuto with a terribly sad look.

"What is it?"

"I want you to fall in love with me."

Those straightforward, pure, and earnest words stabbed directly into Akuto's chest.

But before he could provide an answer, his arms started to move.

—I'm not doing this... Is she doing it!?

He could once more feel the flow of mana he had felt during class.

Akuto's hands moved against his will. One gently brushed through Keena's hair and the other wrapped around her waist.

"You shouldn't control my hands," he said.

Keena looked confused.

"Eh?"

Keena did not appear to be lying, but Akuto's body slowly moved as if covering Keena. His face gradually approached her cheek.

Keena looked surprised. That expression was not one that could be faked.

—Is she doing it subconsciously!?

In his surprise, Akuto resisted and tried to bring his body back under his control. However, pouring a bit of strength into his body was not enough to move of his own accord.

—This isn't right. It isn't good for her.

As Keena's subconscious control continued, Akuto raised his voice.

"Get away!"

"Get away!? Oh, how cold! If we have done anything to offend you, please forgive us!"

The members of Black Demon King suddenly bowed down.

"Please find it in your heart to forgive us! We will do anything!"

Akuto was of course not listening.

Black Demon King had merely convinced themselves that a conversation was taking place.

"Get away? But you're moving toward me?"

"You are trying to control me without realizing it!"

"Everyone, cast aside your expectations! Having expectations for the demon king puts a burden on him! However, this means our desires have reached his ears!"

"I don't know...what to do..."

"Being lonely for so long has been a great burden. This needless power is an attempt to regain what was lost."

"The demon king has been lonely! He has been trapped in that academy! He has experienced terrible humiliation! But rest easy, everyone! The demon king is working to regain his lost power!"

"Lonely? I have?"

"You were looking at no one but me. You had convinced yourself that being accepted by me is all you needed to be happy."

"Exactly! We have been looking at no one but you, great demon king!"

"Ohhhhh! I can hardly believe it! The demon king knew of us!"

"But... That is because I love you."

"I know. But it isn't true. You have yet to learn who I really am."

"How wonderful! The demon king will show us his true power!"

"Ohhh! So even slaying a god was not his true power!? And now we will see his true power!?"

"Who you really are?"

"We do not need to rush this. We can create memories bit by bit from now on. I will be watching."

"That's right! It all starts here! The legend starts here!"

"We will create a nightmare that will remain in everyone's memories! We will create an unforgettable nightmare! The demon king is watching! He is watching everything in this world!"

"You will be...watching?"

"Yes. So listen to my desire. Do not try to use everything around you for your own purposes. Those feelings are restricting me."

"The demon king has commanded us to offer up everything we have! Hand over your money! Hand over your lives! Abandon it all for faith in the demon king!"

"Ohhhh! For the coming world! For the coming world!"

"I don't know what you mean..."

"Don't worry. We can start from here. Start by settling down."

With those words, Keena finally released her control over Akuto's body. She lost consciousness at the same moment. At this point, Akuto finally looked up and checked on his surroundings.

"He has commanded us to settle down!"

"We will settle down on this spot and create a beachhead for the coming world!"

"This open terrace belongs to Black Demon King! We will modify it into a permanent concert house! Outta the way, you cowardly knights! Listen to our performance praising the demon king and sink into the depths of despair!"

The members of Black Demon King began a magical musical performance.

"Wh-what?"

Akuto was dumbfounded by the further worsening of the situation, but it was already too late.

<Crush them! Don't worry about our drunk comrades! Blow them all away!> ordered the knight leader.

The knights fired attack magic, but Black Demon King's vocalist defended against it all with a great flash produced by his throat-crushing death shout.

"We can't embarrass ourselves in a fight in the presence of the demon king!"

<Don't falter! Continue fighting until reinforcements arrive!>

That small café in a quiet residential district became a battlefield.

Many sounds were heard: explosions, shouts, distorted guitar notes, continued confessions from the knights, accompanying slander, screams, and a chorus of protests.

Hatred and smoke whirled around and Akuto sat calmly in the center of it all with Keena in his lap. He was of course only motionless because he had no idea what to do, but others saw it as him effortlessly spreading chaos around him.

"Oh, how dreadful..."

"So this is the power of the demon king."

"His mere presence drives the knights to confusion and spreads chaos through his surroundings!"

Junko and the others heard those rumors spreading through the townspeople.

"This is horrible," muttered Junko as she looked around.

It seemed the knights were attempting to pin the blame for everything on the demon king so they could hide their scandals. The knights not taking part in the battle were mixing in with the townspeople and spreading rumors of their own.

"Do they know no shame?"

Junko began to draw her short sword, but Korone stopped her once more.

"No. We should focus on getting the two of them away from here. If you can cause a distraction, I can rescue them and return to the academy."

"A distraction? I guess I have to go on a bit of rampage."

Junko sounded angry, but Fujiko cut in.

"You should have no problem with a distraction," she said with an odd calm.

"Eh?"

Junko turned toward Fujiko to find the girl was smiling in embarrassment.

"The necklace is being overloaded. I am embarrassed to admit it, but it will lose control and explode before long. Oh ho ho..."

"So you gave him something dangerous without thinking of the consequences," muttered Junko in annoyance.

"No. I trusted Akuto-sama enough to know he would be fine. Ho ho ho."

Fujiko's ridiculous comment was followed by smoke from an explosion rising in Akuto's direction.

"Now!"

Korone raised a hand to show off the invisible sheet she held there.

"Invisible Cover! Anyone covered by this is invisible to those around them."

"You do not need to explain it."

"Just hurry up and go. We will be fleeing."

And shortly thereafter, Akuto and the others were gone.

However, the chaos remained.

No one died, but the total sum of the damages was said to be quite something. Café Bakhtin became famous as the location of the advent of the demon king. Demon king worshipers began to gather there, it began to fail financially, and the owner disappeared to go somewhere else. It was now a concert house that only black metal bands performed at.

"All I wanted to do was go on a date," complained Akuto.

Three girls were sitting seiza-style on the ground in front of him: Junko, Fujiko, and Korone. Junko had of course been the one to explain to Akuto what had happened.

"I am truly sorry this happened while I was with them."

Junko bowed down and Fujiko looked displeased.

"What do you mean 'while I was with them'? Please do not try to act like the good girl."

"What!? It was mostly your fault, senpai!" angrily shouted Junko.

Fujiko looked up at Akuto in a flattering way.

"You know I only did this for your sake, don't you, Akuto-sama?"

"The blame does not lie with any of us. It is his fault for not going to a companion café," murmured Korone.

"Do not be ridiculous! And you are his observer, so you should have done more!"

"An observer does not interfere."

"You should have this time! You were clearly enjoying it!"

"Ahh! Shut up, all three of you!"

Akuto was actually angry for once, so their apologies continued late into the night.

Notes:

Jump up ↑ Japanese for rice.

Chapter 2: I Want to Eat Rice Pudding

"Could you teach me how to have sex?"

Keena Dorons suddenly stuck her head in front of Akuto's face.

They were inside his dorm room during a day off. He had only just woken up.

Akuto had half sat up when he heard the door open, but Keena had jumped onto the bed.

"Eh?"

"I want you to teach me how to have sex," repeated Keena.

—Um...

Akuto calmed down his heart.

She did not seem to be trying to seduce him. He knew from Fujiko that a girl would act more suggestively if that were the case. Keena's face was pure innocence.

"I saw it in this magazine. It has a special feature on becoming beautiful with sex. I want to be more beautiful, so let's have sex."

Keena displayed a magazine on her student handbook's mana screen

and showed it to Akuto.

It was a women's fashion magazine. It had precisely the special feature Keena had described.

"Well, if you read it...I guess you know what it entails..." said Akuto while feeling troubled.

Keena nodded in understanding and said, "I understand the theory behind it, but not enough to actually do it myself."

—The theory behind it? What theory is that?

"H-how much do you know?"

Akuto was unsure what to say, so he slid his finger across the mana screen to flip through the pages.

—Sure enough. It doesn't actually talk about the important parts.

It was an all-ages magazine, so it avoided any direct descriptions. The farthest it went was showing the naked upper bodies of a couple in a manga-style illustration.

"It seems to use a lot of technical terms. I didn't understand any of them, so I want you to tell me what they mean, too. For example, fe-..."

Keena started to say a dangerous term, so Akuto frantically drowned her out with a word of his own.

"Vermeer[1]. Johannes Vermeer is famous for The Milkmaid."

"That's it. Vermeer. Now that I think about it, it did say something about milk. It said guys loved it when you did it. And the opposite is cunn-..."

"Kundalini yoga. I believe it is supposed to revitalize the body. But it is also said to be dangerous."

"Ohh, you know a lot about this. Now I know why everyone calls you an expert at sex."

—People call me that?

This depressed Akuto a bit, but driving Keena out of his room came first.

"Um, well... Anyway, it isn't something you should do first thing in the morning."

"Eh? But this says you will become even more beautiful if you occasionally do it all day long."

—Honestly, what kind of magazine is this?

"Y-you're supposed to do this after getting married."

"That's odd. This says nothing about being married first. In fact, it says the dangerous thrill of doing it with people married to someone else makes you even more beautiful."

—This is getting more and more outrageous...

"Both people have to agree to it."

"Then please just tell me how to do it!"

Keena stuck her head out toward Akuto.

"Um, but..."

Akuto was at a complete loss for an answer when a voice spoke from above.

"I have heard the problem."

Korone stuck her head out past the door of the storage shelf near the ceiling. She slept there in Akuto's room during the night.

—I get the feeling this is only going to get more complicated.

But before Akuto could stop her, Korone hopped down to the bed and

pulled a single rape flower from her bag.

"Are you listening? A flower has parts known as the stamen and the pistil..."

Korone began elementary sex education with a perfectly serious expression and Keena nodded with a serious expression of her own.

"Oh. And what do they do?"

"The stamen has pollen in it and that pollinizes the pistil."

"Okay, that's enough!"

Akuto got up and shoved Keena and Korone out of his room.

"Oh! How cruel, darling."

"I have barely begun with my explanation."

"Please give me a break. I want to think alone today," said Akuto.

He was not making up this desire to kick them out. That was what he really wanted to do.

"You want to think alone?" asked Korone and Akuto nodded.

"Sorry. Could you leave me alone during the morning at least?"

"But I am your observer, so I would like to know what you are thinking about."

Akuto thought on Korone's words before answering.

"A problem concerning my future. You could say it has to do with whether I will be able to graduate from this academy or not."

"That is serious. In that case, I will not let anyone in here during the morning," said Korone.

"Then I'll have Korone tell me how to have sex in that time! I'll be back in the afternoon to have sex!" announced Keena cheerfully.

"No, you don't have to do that. And...I would prefer it if you skipped on the explanation too," said Akuto.

Korone could obviously hear him, but she gave no response.



"You can become even healthier by using this," said Korone as she showed Keena a rod-shaped object that vibrated when she pressed a button.

Keena had fun waving it around while it vibrated.

"Oh! I get the feeling this could make you really healthy!"

Akuto's room was on the first floor. A yard existed outside his window. Korone and Keena were sitting there. They were of course discussing Korone's careless sex education.

"Wait... What are you doing with such an indecent object?" asked Fujiko as she walked over.

"This is not indecent at all. It is a massager."

"True. Those types of toys usually are labeled as joke goods."

Korone bringing out some strange object was nothing new, so Fujiko asked no further questions and changed the subject.

"Is Akuto-sama in his room?"

"He is, but he told me to keep everyone out until the afternoon."

"Is he still mad?"

"No, he said he wanted to think about an important decision concerning his future. I believe it includes deciding whether he will quit the academy or not."

"What?" Fujiko was shocked and she spoke the first thought that came

to mind. "Then has he finally decided to become the demon king and unite with me!?"

"That I do not know."

Korone's response was cold, but Fujiko was not listening.

"Ho ho ho ho! This is my victory! Now, I must think about the future as well!"

"The future?" asked Keena curiously.

"Yes. Akuto-sama is certainly thinking about his future with me!"

"I don't know about the future, but darling is going to have sex with me this afternoon," said Keena innocently.

Fujiko froze over. Her cheek twitched as if she had heard something unbelievable.

"Wh-what did you say?"

"He's going to have sex with me! He'll put his seed inside me to impregnate me!" Keena was grinning. "We'll use tons of toys, too! And I'll perform fe...fe...whatever it's called and then drink his milk to make my skin glossy!"

"Wh-wh-whaaaaaat!?" shrieked Fujiko. She shook her head as if to deny it and pointed forcefully at Keena. "What are you talking about!? If you continue with this nonsense, I will tie you up and throw you in the Amazon River, you bitch!"

Keena looked completely confused.

"Oh! Where did that come from!? All I did was tell you my afternoon plans!"

"Those plans are obvious lies! If I go and ask Akuto-sama-..."

"No. He said no one can go in his room during the morning," said Keena.

Fujiko glared at the girl with bloodshot eyes. She then clapped her hands in realization and muttered to herself with the eyes of a crazed killer looking at her prey.

"That's right. If I can eliminate you during the morning, I do not need to check what Akuto-sama's intentions are."

"W-wait. What's going on?"

Keena must have sensed the danger because she stood up and began backing away.

"Be a good girl and let me kill you! It is all for the sake of my future with

Akuto-sama!”

Fujiko swung up her right hand.

But an instant beforehand, Keena let out a cry and fired a ball of light. Fujiko had not been expecting resistance, so she was late to respond. She was blown away in an explosion.

“Kyaaaah!”

Fujiko was blasted across the yard.

However, her wounds were light. The explosion had only burned away a portion of her clothes.

“N-now you’ve done it!”

As she stood up, Fujiko fired the same type of attack at Keena.

Keena avoided it just before it exploded and frantically ran off.

“Noooooooo! What is going on!?”

“I came over because the boys’ dorm’s courtyard sounded noisy. What happened?”

Junko arrived in the courtyard a while after Fujiko began chasing Keena Dorons around. Korone alone sat in the courtyard.

"A conflict related to Sai Akuto began between Etou Fujiko and Keena Dorons," explained Korone.

"In that case, we have no choice but to have him stop them."

Junko pointed toward Akuto's room.

"No. He said not to disturb him during the morning."

"What a troublesome person. What is the problem with interrupting him?"

"This conflict is merely a trivial issue, but Sai Akuto is holed up in his room contemplating an important decision that includes whether he will quit the academy or not."

"Is that true?" asked Junko.

"Yes," replied Korone with a nod.

"W-wait a second. What is he so troubled about?"

"I do not know the details. He would not tell me," said Korone.

—I see. We may have put too much of a burden on him. But I wish he would discuss it with me... Come to think of it, any normal person would end up holed up in their room if they were treated the way he is. I should probably try to help support him here.

"What are you muttering about?" asked Korone.

Junko looked up in surprise.

"N-nothing! I was just thinking we could get along well if I consoled him now..."

Junko then realized what she had said without thinking and she blushed.

"I see. You are free to do what you wish, but I will not let you in until the afternoon," said Korone.

Junko waved her hands in an attempt to avoid the issue.

"No, no, no! I was not... I was not planning anything like that. I swear. A-anyway, I just have to wait until the afternoon. No, first I need to stop those two. Ha ha. Ha ha.... Ha ha..."

Junko began walking away.

—I need to fix this habit of speaking my thoughts aloud. No, that does not matter. Right now, the fight between those two comes first... I-I know.

If I find out what caused it, I should be able to stop it easily. Okay. That is what I will do. And to do that... I do not like it, but I need help from that stealth human. She can slip past Korone and get into his room.

Junko nodded to herself.

That stealth human was alone in her room with a tense expression on her face.

"Heh heh heh heh heh. I won't give anyone this valuable cup!"

She was grinning despite looking so nervous. Her red hair was waving around excitedly.

It was of course Soga Keena.

She was sitting in a chair looking at a white gelatin in a ceramic cup.

"This is the rice pudding made with the legendary Uonuma-made Koshihikari rice! They make so little of it that it's almost impossible to find! I finally got my hands on some!"

There were various recipes for rice pudding, but the simplest one was to make a rice porridge using milk that had sugar dissolved into it and then to cool it. When made that way, it tasted exactly as one would expect. It was commonly eaten in other countries, but it was not all that popular in the empire where rice was a staple food.

What Keena was looking at had the rice completely dissolved and used coconut milk, so it was quite well suited as a dessert. However, it was still not exactly popular. Keena had called it valuable, but one could also say so little of it was made because it was not popular.

However, almost everything had someone obsessed with it. On the rice mailing lists, rice message boards, and rice communities that Keena browsed, this maker's rice pudding was considered a legend. Keena had not been present for the incident at Café Bakhtin because she had been running around trying to acquire this.

"The deciding factor for rice pudding is the harmony between the sweetness of the rice and the sweetness of the sugar. But this adds in the sweetness of the coconut milk and the sweetness of fruit to bring out an exquisite harmony! Heh heh... Eh heh heh... I haven't even eaten any and I'm already drooling..."

Keena picked up the spoon.

"Now, without further delay..."

In that instant, the door to her dorm room opened.

"Keena, I have a favor to ask of you! Can you give me a hand?"

Junko entered the room.

"Fweh?"

Keena had been so focused on the rice pudding, that she misheard what Junko said. Or rather, she had not heard everything she said.

Keena, I have a favor to ask of you! Can you give me...?"

Can you give me...?

Can you give me your rice pudding?

"E-eeeeee! Nooooooooo!"

She would not hand over the rice pudding. Keena quickly grabbed the cup and charged toward Junko who stood at the entrance.

"H-hey, what are you-...?"

Junko tried to stop Keena, but Keena threw her right leg forward, lowered her body, and used that dropping motion to throw her body forward. When her right foot reached the ground, her body did not rise back up. She dragged her left leg around in a half rotation and slipped right past Junko.

"Wha-!?"

Junko was utterly shocked.

She had been absolutely confident in her non-magical combat ability and yet Keena had slipped past her.

"Th-that was the Kobudo technique, Shukuchi!"

Shukuchi was a technique that allowed one to instantly move a distance of several paces by putting all of one's body weight on a leg that was brought forward.

Junko doubted Keena had mastered that technique. Later, Junko decided that the focus provided by Keena's attachment to the rice pudding had led her to instinctually choose the most suitable method of using her body in that moment. At any rate, Keena had slipped past Junko and she began running down the dorm hallway.

"Tch!"

Junko chased after her. Junko was of course the faster runner. However, Junko knew it would not be that easy.

"I knew it!"

Junko lost the instant Keena turned a corner.

Once Junko made it around the corner, she found Keena's clothes on the ground.

Now that the girl was invisible, Junko had no way of tracking her.

"Damn... But wait. Why did she run away?"

Keena hid behind a wall of the boys' dorm. She was naked except for the curtain wrapped around her. She had removed it from a random classroom window while fleeing.

"Junko-chan shouldn't pursue me to the boys' dorm. Now, I need to eat this rice pudding! I didn't expect to eat it outside, but rice pudding eaten under the blue sky has to be amazing."

While clearly almost drooling, Keena began to stick the spoon into the white pudding. But then...

An explosion occurred right next to her.

"Keenaaaaaa!" came a shout of anger in Fujiko's voice.

Fujiko herself then charged toward Keena.

"Ehhhhh!? Why!?"

Keena ran away. Fujiko had of course been shouting at the blonde Keena, but the red-haired Keena had no way of knowing that from the name alone.

"Wh-why is senpai after me, too?"

Keena stripped off the curtain, turned invisible, and ran off while holding the rice pudding cup.

"Keenaaaaa! Where did you go!?"

Fujiko searched for the blonde Keena with a monstrous look on her face.

"Sh-she really is looking for me... Ah! It can't be!"

Keena looked down at the rice pudding in her hand.

"It must have gotten out that I have this! I didn't know Junko-chan and senpai were both after it, too."

"Why are you chasing me!? If you want to join in on the sex this afternoon, the three of us can do it together!"

Keena Dorons fired spheres of light and lightly jumped around as she fled from Fujiko.

"A threesome? That might not be a bad idea... No, I cannot do that! Akuto-sama is mine and mine alone!"

Fujiko was not about to lose either. She was fiercely fighting back while pursuing Keena. By this point, Fujiko had gotten serious as well. Instead of using those spheres of light she was naturally unskilled with, she pursued Keena by using the small bottles of potion she walked around with. She put a chemical on Keena's clothes to act as a marker, used that to locate the girl, and fired spheres of light that automatically followed her.

Students began to gather as they noticed the commotion.

"What, what?"

"Fujiko-sama and the new student are fighting?"

"We have to help her! Our gentle Fujiko-sama would never begin fighting without a good reason!"

"That new student must have made some kind of mistake!"

The gathering students made comments like that and began assisting Fujiko.

"Wh-why are so many people gathering here?"

Keena was even more confused, but Fujiko's attitude suddenly changed.

"Everyone! This is dangerous, so please stay back! That girl suddenly attacked me! And while shouting obscene words no less! She is no

different from a dangerous wild animal!"

Fujiko decided to feign innocence.

And of course, the gathered students believed Fujiko completely.

"I'll never forgive her!

"How could she do that to our graceful Fujiko-sama!?"

More people began shouting angrily and pursuing Keena. The fact that it was a day off meant the students still in the dorm had nothing better to do, so they began to take part in the festival.

"Wh-wh-what? Why? No! She's lying!" protested Keena, but no one was willing to listen to her.

She was like a hare being hunted by hounds.

"Nooooo! Why is this happening!?"

Keena continued to flee.

But something happened just as she stood still, conflicted over which way to turn at a corner.

"Hyah!"

Something invisible ran into Keena.

Needless to say, this invisible something was Soga Keena.

But Keena Dorons did not have time to stand around in confusion. Her pursuers were approaching. She frantically ran off.

"Ow ow..."

Soga Keena had fallen to the ground, but she had managed to not drop the rice pudding cup. She was lying on the ground completely naked and with her legs spread wide open, but that was no problem because she was invisible.

"Wh-whew... That was close."

Keena stood up to run away from the blonde Keena who was looking around wondering what had happened.

Then a crowd of students led by Fujiko arrived. They were of course after the blonde Keena, but the red-haired Keena was unfortunately not the type to think of that kind of thing.

"A-a lot of people are after this rice pudding!" said Keena with great force and conviction. "M-my only choice is to eat it as I run away..."

She gulped.

But then she shook her head.

“No! It would be rude to the artisan that that made it if I didn’t eat it in the optimal conditions! A lot of effort went into making this ultimate snack!”

Keena then began focusing on running away.

“I need to find somewhere no one will go... I know! The roof is locked, so no one can go there!”

Keena gave up trying to run and flew into the air.

“Eating rice pudding on the roof! That has to be the best! Ahh, it will be white, smooth, and just a bit sweet. It will be like eating a cloud! Yes! The blue sky will suit that best! It will be like grated radish and sudachi on pacific saury! No, thinking about other foods will only dull my sense of taste! I know! It’s as perfect a match as dew on a ladybug! I need to get as close to the sky as possible!”

Keena flew up into the sky as she spoke on and on.

“Ugh. They do nothing but cause problems.”

Lily Shiraishi, the student council president, used the secret key only she

had to open the door to the roof. She had wanted a large empty space. She had received a lot of complaints from the nearby townspeople due to the commotion in the town the day before. The knights had also gotten angry at her. All of it had irritated her, so she planned to let off some steam on a sandbag she had brought with her.

Most of the students could use flight magic, but they were honest enough to keep off of the roof when it was off limits. The roof had only been made off limits because a large hole had been created in it during the war. The rumor of Suhara's high priest dying there had conveniently made the area creepy enough that even those that could fly kept away from it.

"Good. No one here. Maybe I can just leave this here."

Lily lifted up the sandbag with telekinesis and hung it down from a pole stretching from the fence. She threw a few test punches into the air and then held her hands up.

"It's that guy's fault for going out into the town."

Lily hit the sandbag once.

It creaked and shook back and forth.

"I don't know what exactly happened, but I can make a pretty good guess. Etou Fujiko must have done something."

Punch, punch.

"And the knights!"

Punch, punch, punch!

"They have guts to blame a student in order to hide their own scandals!"

Punch, punch, punch, punch, punch, punch!

"Ahh, it pisses me off! Chewing calcium everyday just isn't enough!"

Punch punch punch punch punch punch punch punch punch punch
punch punch punch punch punch!

Lily sent a barrage of punches at the sandbag with tremendous force.

And then Keena flew to the roof while invisible.

Keena had only heard the end of what Lily had said.

"Chewing calcium everyday isn't enough? And she's so focused on punching that sandbag. She must really want this! But how did word of this spread through the entire academy?"

Keena hid behind the water tower on the roof.

"That way, Fujiko-sama!" shouted a student while pointing toward the roof.

"So she ran that way."

Fujiko began running up the stairs.

Fujiko and the others were following the marker placed on Keena Dorons's clothes. However, that marker was now attached to Soga Keena's body. And Fujiko and the others were completely unaware of this fact.

"She went to the roof? But it's off limits."

Fujiko and the others realized the door to the roof was locked.

"That does not matter. It is off limits because the large hole is being repaired. If she is hiding here, she is as good as cornered!"

Fujiko's words motivated the students to blow down the door with magic.

With an explosion, the door slid out onto the roof.

"Let's go!"

Fujiko and her followers surged out onto the roof. Her followers

numbered exactly twenty.

"Where are you!?"

"Come out!"

"We won't let you escape!"

The twenty of them spread out across the roof. One of them stepped on the door that had been blown away a moment before. He realized the door felt odd under his feet. The door then began to move.

"W-wah!" he cried out and jumped off of it.

A figure slipped out from under the door. In other words, this person had been pinned under the door when it was blasted from its hinges.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

It was of course Lily Shiraishi who lifted the door up and slipped out from under it.

The veins in her forehead were bulging out. She glared at the students with a lovely expression that would have made even a starving wild dog run away.

Lily was the most skilled in the academy (in fights) and was the student

council president, so she was obviously not your average student. Her fearsomeness was well known throughout the school. The students' all had the expression of someone who found out the supposed friend they teased was actually a yakuza member.

"W-wait... We didn't realize you were there. We never would have thought you would be here."

"What? Are you saying you didn't notice me because I'm so small?"

The student had meant nothing of the sort, but Lily was extremely bothered by how short she was.

"N-no... I didn't say that.... S-sorry. I'm the type of person that doesn't think about little issues like that..."

The student accidentally hit Lily precisely where it hurt.

"Y-y-you bastards..."

She had been irritated even before any of this happened, so Lily was already reaching up for the brim of her stylish hat. Turning that hat backward was the sign that Lily was truly angry.

"You aren't leaving here alive!"

She reversed the hat.

In the very next instant, twenty students flew up into the air. Lily's arms grew in number like the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara and each one stretched out like it was made of rubber. Every one of the students was hit by about 10 punches instantly.

"If it were night, you would have all become new constellations. You're lucky it's daytime."

As soon as Lily finished speaking, the students slammed down headfirst onto the roof.

Lily then glared at the one remaining person.

"Ho... Ho ho ho... I think you have made a sma-...slight misunderstanding."

Fujiko tried to laugh it off.

Fujiko was not about to pick a direct fight with someone stronger than the three student council officers.

"You almost said small just now, didn't you?"

Lily continued giving herself a reason to fight.

"Heh...heh heh... In that case, you leave me no choice. Everyone is unconscious, so I can go all out!"

Fujiko grew defiant when she realized she could not flee. In the span of a breath, she removed her school uniform. A bondage-style leather suit appeared underneath.

"Cerberus!" called out Fujiko and a giant dog quickly appeared on the rooftop.

The demonic beasts had quieted down quite a bit since the war, but Fujiko was raising one she had grown fond of.

"Damn you. You have guts to oppose me."

"This may not have been my intention, but I will not hold back! Oh, I know. If I win, I will take your position as student council president!"

Both of them had already forgotten why they were fighting.

Lily and Fujiko glared at each other while the latter straddled the Cerberus.

Tension swelled up in the atmosphere between them. If someone had given a sign, they would have moved simultaneously. However, someone entered through the broken door before that happened.

"Senpai! I heard what is going on from Korone and Dorons! What are you doing!?"

Junko stepped out onto the rooftop along with Keena Dorons.

Junko had run into Keena Dorons while pursuing Soga Keena and had asked the blonde girl about the situation. Keena had simply said that Fujiko suddenly attacked her.

Junko could not make heads or tails of how Lily and Fujiko had ended up glaring at each other.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she asked again.

Incidentally, Lily and Fujiko also no longer knew the details behind this fight.

"Hmph. We were arguing over what to eat for dinner."

That was one of Lily's first class jokes. And Fujiko enjoyed sarcasm, so she joined in.

"It seems the president is the type who insists on eating quite a lot. She said she wants her breasts to grow as soon as possible."

"That's it. You're dead."

Lily's expression grew even more ghastly. Any child that saw it would have been traumatized for life.

"Wait, you two. I cannot overlook this."

Junko tried to cut in between them, but Lily threw a jab with an extended arm.

The fist struck Junko's forehead. She had held back in order to warn Junko away.

But...

"Stop it. You couldn't stand up to me when we fought underground."

Junko had been staggering and crouching down, but Lily's words brought flames to her eyes.

"President. Take back those words! I am not the same as I was. I will take part in this fight over what to eat for dinner!"

Junko smoothly drew something at her waist. It was her family's treasure, the Sword of Sohaya. The sword had been given transcendent power from the god Suhara. Its power had dropped quite a bit with the god gone, but it was still a first class sword. Its ability to boost its user's mana still worked just fine.

A rainbow-colored sparkle ran across the blade and Junko's body was surrounded by mana.



That extraordinary intimidating atmosphere made Lily get serious as well.

"I like the look in your eyes! And that power! This looks like fun! You can both come at me at once!"

Wind blew wildly through that concrete hill. Three beautiful girls stood among several unconscious students. They were all enveloped in different types of elegance and strength and their bodies were tense in preparation for the coming battle.

The scene made quite a nice picture. All of them had forgotten why they were fighting. However...

"Yaaaaaahh!"

Unsurprisingly, Lily threw the first blow. She had not been lying when she said she would fight both of them at once. Repeated attacks from her extending arms flew toward both Fujiko and Junko.

"Avoid them!"

Fujiko gave an order to the Cerberus and left the rest up to the beast's reaction speed. The giant three-headed dog did not falter when faced with multiple simultaneous attacks. It splendidly stepped to the left and right to avoid them.

Meanwhile, Junko created multiple copies of herself with mana. Four copies were destroyed by Lily's fierce assault. However, the real Junko was no longer there.

"Tch!"

Lily searched for Junko.

"Normally, she would be up above...but she's actually below!"

Lily managed to sense the flow of mana and locate Junko at the last second. She hopped up to avoid the attack meant to sweep her feet out from under her.

"Can you avoid this!?"

Junko had used mana to create a sheet camouflaged as the concrete floor and attacked while hiding underneath it. After that supposedly surefire attack was avoided, Junko's crouched position left her open to attack.

"Heh!"

Lily tried to throw a punch straight down, but Fujiko took action before she could.

"You have more than one opponent!"

Fujiko swung her whip toward Lily. She had waited until Lily had jumped into the air, but that was not a true opening for someone who could use mana to fly. Lily stopped in midair and sliced through the whip with a mana-covered karate chop.

"Oh, no! ...is what you wanted to hear, isn't it? But I am not the physical type."

Having the whip cut was part of Fujiko's plan. She threw the whip toward Lily. The whip wrapped around the president as if it had a will of its own.

"What!? You had this prepared ahead of time!?" cried Lily in surprise.

The whip wrapped around her body and she groaned in pain.

"Ho ho ho ho! You cannot win if you simply come straight in for the attack!"

Fujiko laughed victoriously.

"You coward! Don't rely on tools! Use your bare hands! Come at me with your bare hands!" complained Lily.

She could still extend her arms, but she could not create the speed needed for a punch because she could not use her shoulders. Fujiko used the Cerberus to easily evade the attacks.

"Using one's bare hands is so uncivilized! And when you are bound like that, you are supposed to provide some fan service with your breasts being squeezed out through the gaps in the whip, but it looks like that is impossible with your body type. Ho ho ho."

"Ugaaah! I'm gonna cry! I really am!" wailed Lily, but Fujiko only laughed.

But then her laugh froze over.

"Know some shame!"

With that shout, the whip was sliced apart and Lily's body was freed. Before Fujiko could even be surprised, someone was suddenly standing atop one of the Cerberus's heads even as the beast moved around. Junko stood in an imposing stance looking down at Fujiko.

"I have wanted to tell you a few things for a while now!"

"Yes. And how seriously you take everything really pisses me off!"

Fujiko quickly tried to attack, but the Cerberus staggered and Junko had to move away.

"Either way, I just have to take both of you out!"

Lily sent her fists flying randomly toward both Fujiko and Junko.

"Please do not joke!" roared Fujiko as the Cerberus dashed around.

"If you want a battle, you have one!"

Junko created copies of herself so she could face both Lily and Fujiko. Lily responded to them head on and Fujiko had the Cerberus move

around throughout the fray.

The battle intensified, the situation grew more confused, and chaos filled the rooftop.

And two people were watching over it all.

They were the two Keenas.

The red-haired Keena had made a strange misunderstanding as she watched it all from her hiding spot.

"Ahh! This rice pudding is causing so much trouble! This must be the dinner they were talking about! Ahh, what am I supposed to do!? This wonderful rice pudding is causing friends to fight each other! I never knew how painful it was to not have peace throughout the world!"

As Keena acted like a tragic heroine, she held up the rice pudding cup while in the pose of a praying maiden.

"H-how did this end up happening!?"

Meanwhile, the blonde Keena stood dumbfounded where she had been left on the roof after arriving with Junko.

And to make it worse, the effects of the battle reached her.

"Kyah!"

Concrete fragments rained down on her.

She covered herself with her hands, but a small stone still struck her forehead.

"Ow!"

Keena brought a hand to her forehead and a small amount of blood stuck to her fingers.

"Blood! Noooo! Ow! Noooo!"

Keena began shouting and crying as soon as she noticed the blood.

However, the three fighting did not notice.

Lily deflected some fire the Cerberus breathed out and a portion of it flew toward Keena.

"Watch out!"

Keena's body was knocked to the side. The red-haired Keena had tackled her while invisible to protect her from the spray of flames.

"Kyaaah!"

The sudden action had surprised Keena. Finally, the other three noticed what was happening.

"Hm?"

"What?"

"What is it?"

The three girls turned toward where the blonde Keena had fallen to the ground. The red-haired Keena was also beginning to appear.

"Stop!" cried the red-haired Keena as she spread her arms in the pose of a maiden stopping a war. "Stop fighting! Please! I beg you!"

She was crying. The other three may have been girls as well, but a girl's tears still held some power.

"B-but I am fighting to right a wrong," mumbled Junko.

"But Doro-chan is hurt!"

Keena's rebuttal silenced Junko, but Fujiko refused to give in.

"This all started with her attitude!"

Lily had merely gotten wrapped up in it all, but she was not going to back down so easily.

"I can't sit idly by after being suddenly blown away."

"Stop! I know what you're fighting over! So..." Keena kneeled down and held out the rice pudding cup. "Let's share this! Isn't that good enough!?"

The three girls looked at the cup suspiciously.

"...What are you talking about?"

"Also..."

"What is that?"

"What are you saying!? This is the rice pudding! It's the ultimate product made from the legendary Uonuma-made Koshihikari rice! The rice has been filtered until it is smooth and has been perfectly matched with the milk! Its sublime flavor is said to make you feel like you're ascending into heaven! Its flavor is superb! Even that Rosanjin praised this ultimate meal by saying 'every day should begin with rice pudding and every day should also end with rice pudding'! It received 1st place on a newspaper sponsored survey of the final thing you would want to eat before dying!"

As Keena lost herself in explaining, the other three could do nothing but exchange a glance.

"Rice...pudding?"

"I've never eaten it."

"Simply put, it is milk rice porridge. The unsweetened ones taste exactly like that while the sweetened ones are made like candy, so they are not much different from a normal pudding," explained Fujiko indifferently.

Lily looked toward Fujiko mockingly.

"That's what caused all this? You blew down the door to the roof for that?"

"Of course not! This is obviously another one of that girl's ridiculous misunderstandings!"

"It probably is, but... Ahh! This all seems so foolish now."

Junko sighed and sheathed her sword.

"We can leave this until later."

Lily's shoulders drooped.

"Yes. You can leave now, Cerberus."

Fujiko sent Cerberus back to its lair and put on her uniform.

"Thank goodness! You all understood! Now, let's eat it! Together!"

Keena began trying to figure out how to cleanly divide the rice pudding into five equal servings, but the other three passed right by her.

"I will be going now."

"You can have it all yourself."

"If I really wanted some, I would buy it with the student council's budget."

Keena glanced around in confusion.

"Eh? Then I can have it to myself? Oh, but you want some, right, Doro-chan?"

Keena turned toward the blonde Keena who had been crying. The blonde Keena's eyes were now glittering innocently as she looked at the rice pudding. As usual, she could be ridiculously pure. It seemed she had believed every word of the red-haired Keena's explanation.

"Y-you'll really share something that amazing with me!? You really will?"

"Sure. Let's eat it together."

The two Keenas nodded at each other.

And then someone else appeared on the roof.

"Huh? I thought I heard a commotion. Is everyone okay?"

Akuto stuck his head out of the broken door. Junko, Fujiko, and Lily were surprised to see him.

"Ah."

"Akuto-sama!"

"What are you here for?"

This did not change much for Lily, but it reminded Junko and Fujiko of the original reason for the fight.

"H-hey, I heard you were worried about your future! Why did you not come ask me about it?"

"Akuto-sama! You decided on a happy future with me, didn't you!?"

Junko and Fujiko rushed toward Akuto.

Akuto then gave a confused apology.

"Eh? I apologize if you misunderstood something. I just wanted some time to think on my own. That was all."

"And what did you want to think about? I heard it was an important issue related to your future."

"No. I felt bad about what happened to the owner of Café Bakhtin. His café was destroyed because of me and he might still be unemployed because of it. I was thinking about sending him some money."

"But Akuto-sama, you are not wealthy, are you? Wouldn't that be quite a large sum of money?"

"That's why I was thinking about asking the headmaster to lend me the wages I would earn after graduating. I wouldn't be able to stand it otherwise. I took some time to think and drew up a tentative schedule for repaying the loan."

"What!? I cannot allow you to work, Akuto-sama! If this is what you want, then I will pay! I can pay 100 million or even 200 million if need be!" said Fujiko as she embraced Akuto.

Junko then spoke loudly to drown out and oppose her.

"I-If that is the case, then some of the responsibility lies with me. I can have my family pay for it."

As both girls insisted on paying, Akuto shook his head.

"No. I thought about it and decided we can't rely on our parents' money just because we are students. Also, I do not want to use any money dyed in the colors of a certain family. Relying on the Hattori family was part of what caused everything that happened before."

"Th-then..."

"Unless I earn it myself or acquire it by chance, any money I use will be dyed in certain political colors, right? It has to be me that does something about this."

Despite what Akuto said, Fujiko and Junko refuse to back down.

"No! I will gather money for you in secret!"

"Senpai, I don't think anyone wants that kind of dirty money."

"What are you talking about!? It is better than using our parents' money, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but I still think it is my personal responsibility to make up for what happened to the café."

"No, it is not! That was all Keena Dorons's fault! Speaking of which, it was Dorons's ridiculous attitude that caused this fight as well."

“That reminds me! I heard you were bullying Dorons, so I came to stop you.”

Fujiko and Junko looked like they would explode at the slightest provocation.

Akuto looked troubled. In hopes of help, he turned toward Lily who had the most authority of those on the roof. However, she shook her head in annoyance and quickly left as if to say, “Not my problem.”

Fujiko and Junko were still shouting back and forth when Soga Keena stepped between them. She was naked except for the top layer of a school uniform.

“Don’t fight! If we all eat the rice pudding together, it will solve everything! We can all get along!”

Keena’s point of view was as ridiculous as ever.

Fujiko and Junko had no intention of responding to her, but when they glanced over, they saw Keena Dorons eating the rice pudding they were sharing.

“Ohhh! This is delicious! Who would have thought there was a way to make rice this delicious! This really is lovely! Now we can all get along!”

From what she was saying now, it seemed Keena Dorons had

completely forgotten about the topic of sex.

The piece of clothing Soga Keena wore belonged to Keena Dorons. It seemed she had lent it to her after they started to get along.

"C'mon, let's get along! It's really good, so try some!"

Junko and Fujiko took the cup and spoon held out to them and each took a bite in turn.

And they both made wonderful grimaces.

"This is an...odd taste," commented Junko.

"No, just come out and say it. This is terrible," said Fujiko.

"Ehh? It's good? Right? Right?"

Keena passed the cup to Akuto. It had only one bite left.

Akuto hesitated and then took a bite. He shook his head.

"Sorry, but this is a strange flavor... Huh?"

Akuto had spotted some writing at the bottom of the cup.

"Winner?"



The word "winner" was indeed written on the bottom of the cup.

"Ahhh! We did it! We won!" cried Soga Keena ecstatically. "Another reason this rice pudding is so popular is because of the contest. You

almost never win, but the prize is huge."

"The prize?"

"Yeah. The amount of money accumulates as long as no one wins. Right now I think it's...50 million."

Keena casually made that amazing announcement.

Keena put the cup in Akuto's hand as everyone else looked on in shock.

"You said money you acquired by chance is fine, right? You were the last one to eat it, A-chan, so this is yours."

Akuto was completely dumbfounded, but Keena was completely calm.

"See, the rice pudding brought peace. That's why everyone should eat rice pudding together!"

Afterwards, rice pudding became incredibly popular among the students who had heard the rumor.

However, none of them were able to eat rice pudding every day. The two Keenas were seen as useful because they were the only two in the academy able to eat the rice pudding.

A large quantity of rice pudding was brought into the school, but no one won the prize and the boom passed.

“They call it the mysterious rice pudding...”

Akuto had managed to send a letter and the winning cup to the owner of Café Bakhtin. He felt bad making this comment after benefiting from the rice pudding.

“...but isn't it because it tastes so bad that it became known as a mystery and that the prize accumulated so high?”

Notes:

Jump up ↑ Vermeer is written as Fermeer in Japanese.

Chapter 3: Literature is Difficult?

The two Keenas seemed to have grown quite close. It may have been due to the rice pudding.

This made things a lot easier for Akuto. The amount of time Keena Dorons spent around him had dropped considerably. However, that did not mean the number of commotions had dropped as well.

“Doro-chan, this book tells the story of something that really happened a long time ago.”

“Really!? I should be able to learn a lot from that!”

Soga Keena had recently begun reading books to Keena Dorons. The blonde Keena was a too-honest reader who believed everything the books said.

—What are they reading now?

Akuto glanced over out of curiosity and saw the title of an old entertainment novel about psychic powers. It was the story of a psychic network being constructed to oppose an evil spirit attacking from space.

—At the very least, I know this is not a true story.

But the blonde Keena seemed to fully believe anything that was written down. In this case, the red-haired Keena believed it too, so the effect was doubled.

"The earth is under attack, isn't it!?"

"Yes. If you don't have a pure heart, the evil spirit can possess you."

The two Keenas nodded at each other.

It seemed Keena Dorons's insistence on being high society when she had first transferred in was due to believing a special feature in a magazine she had read. Based on her confession while drunk, it seemed someone had given her magazines to educate herself with when she was taken in by the knights.

At any rate, the recent commotions were mostly caused by Keena being affected by the books and magazines she read. When she was reading detective stories, she began investigating people and caused an incident when she revealed a teacher's hidden possessions.

—Well, a psychic hero story shouldn't be too much of a problem.

"According to the characteristics of the possessed people described in the story, Mitsuko-sensei might be possessed by the evil spirit! We need to purify her!"

—I take that back. This is a big problem.

"That isn't a true story," cut in Akuto.

"Ehh!?"

The blonde Keena's eyes opened wide in complete surprise.

"You shouldn't do that, A-chan. You need to read books as if they are true," complained the red-haired Keena.

"That doesn't work with fiction," said Akuto with a smile.

However, Keena shook her head.

"No. Books create an original world, so it is good manners as a reader to not bring your knowledge of the real world into the book with you. Looking for a moral in every story or trying to make what you read useful in the real world would make you look stupid, right? Using your knowledge to make fun of the story is the same thing."

Her tone was calm and foolish-sounding, but what she was saying was actually fairly difficult.

—Come to think of it, Keena has pretty good grades in everything but magic.

Akuto nodded in admiration.

"I see. In that case, I was wrong. But that means you need to warn Dorons-san if she tries to emulate the book in the classroom."

"She's learning that bit by bit, so don't worry. Doro-chan is a good girl. If she learns to deny what books say from the very beginning, she'll end up not reading books at all," said Keena with an innocent smile.

"You two really like books," commented Akuto.

The two girls nodded. The blonde one's nod was especially vigorous.

"The stories are so much fun."

In the modern age, most books were digital. The network accessible through the student handbooks was enough to browse a massive amount of written material. However, that had not caused an increase in readers. Having all that data at one's fingertips did not bring about any desire to browse through past data. This was especially true for novels that were unnecessary in everyday life. Unlike with academic papers, there was very little meaning in viewing items from the past.

The digital novels written by modern authors were usually read as a onetime event. Once everyone had read them, they were used as conversational topics and to feel as if one fit in. For example, people would discuss what their favorite books or movies were online to show off their individuality.

However, this was sadly unnecessary for Akuto. He was the kind of person who saw no need for books. He viewed novels as nothing more than books expressing ideals in their themes. However, he was greatly interested in what Keena was thinking for the sake of analyzing the present situation.

"I suppose people who think the gods really do exist might try to find morals and teachings in the novels they read," he said.

The red-haired Keena nodded and the blonde Keena tilted her head.

At that point, someone else interrupted.

"Sorry for interrupting your odd conversation, but the next class is about to begin. It is a hands-on lesson. This one will use groups of three, so you, Keena Dorons, and I can make a group."

This comment was made by Junko.

Ever since they had learned Keena Dorons could control Akuto's power, Junko had stopped being afraid to perform magic lessons with him. After all, Akuto no longer lost control of his power.

"Today, we will be doing hands-on lessons in groups of three. We will be using potions to affect living creatures," said Mitsuko-sensei.

Class began after they moved to the practice room. In front of each group of three was a case with a frog inside and bottles of a few types of potions.

"Make the potion, alter it with magic, and then put it on the frog. Afterwards, you can see if it has the proper effect. You are in groups of three because we do not have enough frogs for everyone, so take turns.

Make a potion that changes the outward color of the frog. Try to create the color you picture in your head," explained Mitsuko-sensei.

However, Junko cowered down a bit and her expression stiffened. She was clearly nervous.

"What is it?" whispered Akuto out of concern.

With him losing control out of the picture, there should have been nothing to worry about.

"N-nothing... I am fine. Yes, perfectly fine. More importantly, do not mess this up," said Junko in a trembling voice.

In truth, Junko was afraid of the frog. Akuto had actually been told this before, but he had completely forgotten.

"I will picture the color in my mind and transfer that pattern to the potion. I shouldn't lose control then," said Akuto.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you don't mess up," said Keena confidently.

"S-sure. Go ahead. Go right ahead," said Junko with a trembling nod.

"Actually, I'm not very confident. Could you go first, Hattori-san?" asked Akuto.

Junko heard Akuto's words, but their meaning did not hit her until a moment later.

"O-oh, right. Sure. It is a simple spell, so just watch."

Junko picked up potion and cast the spell. Transferring her mental image was handled by an automated program in the mana, but the coloration would not fully apply unless that image was distinct. It required practice and there was a trick to it.

After casting the spell, Junko tried to hand the potion to Akuto.

"H-here. I did it."

"W-wait a second. If I touch it, the images will mix together, right?"

Akuto stepped back so as not to touch the potion bottle.

"N-not if you do not picture anything in your head."

"You know it won't work out that conveniently. And this is a hands-on lesson, so you have to do it yourself."

Akuto was oddly diligent but also terrible at catching on. After everything she had said, he should have realized that Junko did not want to touch the frog, but he had a way of not picking up on that sort of thing. On top of that, Junko was stubborn, so she absolutely refused to say she did not want to even approach the frog.

"Right. I-I understand that. I do."

Junko froze on place.

"What is it? Hurry up and do it," urged Keena.

Keena was more innocent than dense, but she had not caught on either. She had seen the other students' frogs changing color, so she could hardly wait to see it up close.

"Yes. I understand. I understand. Okay, here I go. Here I go!" Junko placed a hand on the lid to the case. "I am opening the lid!"

"You don't have to give a running commentary."

Keena gave a perfectly reasonable comment, but Junko was too preoccupied to listen.

"Once I open the lid, I have to drip the potion onto the frog so it permeates its body."

She dripped the potion down from her trembling hand.

However, her hand was well above the frog. In fact, it was 30 centimeters above the case.

The frog was only ten centimeters across, so there was no way she would hit it.

At this point, even Akuto should have realized Junko was afraid of the frog. However...

"Are you trying to make this harder because it's such an easy lesson?"

That was his interpretation.

And Keena was not going to allow it.

"Just splash the potion on it! Like this!"

Keena swiftly grabbed Junko's arm and tugged it toward the frog.

The case shook and the shock caused the frog to cutely jump up. And it grabbed onto Junko's hand that was still holding the potion bottle.

"Pyaaaaaaah!"

Junko literally jumped. She dropped the potion bottle into the case and shook her hand vigorously, but the frog continued clinging to her fingers and would not let go.

"N-n-n-nooooooooooooo!"

Junko raised her hand and swung it around.

"Oh, that's right. Hattori-san is afraid of frogs."

Akuto finally caught on. And once he did, he quickly took action. He grabbed Junko's arm and tried to remove the frog. However, Junko continued struggling even as he held her arm.

The frog that had been sticking to her fingers must have decided this pause in the motion of her fingers was a good time to flee. It jumped straight up into the air.

And after that, it of course fell.

The frog fell down the back of Junko's neck and slipped right under the collar of her shirt.

"H-h-hyaaaah! Slipperyyyyyy!"

Junko began to wriggle around violently. Akuto grabbed Junko to stop her.

"Calm down. The frog isn't going to harm you."

"Th-that is not the issue... Hyah! I-it's going innnnn!"

Junko continued wriggling while blushing in Akuto's arms.

"W-wait. Stop struggling."

Akuto could not hold Junko too strongly. He might crush the frog if he did. He felt around, but he could not find the frog.

"Where is the frog?"

"M-my back! My back!"

Akuto circled around Junko's struggling body and checked her back. He saw a faint green shadow in her shirt.

"I can't just stick my hand in here... Oh, I know. We can use that precision manipulation from class the other day."

Akuto glanced over at Keena.

Keena nodded and seemed to understand what he meant.

"Leave it to me! We're using that precision manipulation from class the other day, right!?"

By having Keena control Akuto's mana, they had succeeded in stacking cubes the size of grains of powder. If they could do the same thing, removing the frog from Junko's clothes would be easy.

Keena touched Akuto's hand.

"I'll control your mana!"

With those words, Keena had Akuto perform the precise work with his mana.



However, this was a two-man activity. If they were not working toward the same purpose, it was meaningless. And in this case, Keena had completely misunderstood Akuto's intention. And Akuto was unable to stop her.

"This will solve everything!" announced Keena as she sent all of Junko's clothes flying up into the air.

It was a truly splendid undressing. None of the clothes were torn, the buttons were undone, the hooks were removed, and the zippers were lowered. The rubber of her panties was stretched to lower them without resistance.

"K-kyaaaah!"

Junko let out a scream for a different reason than before.

Her nude body was splendidly displayed and a stir ran through their classmates.

"How did this happen during such a simple lesson?"

"Now that's a demon king! He strips her for no reason!"

As the boys began looking on with great interest, Akuto frantically removed his coat.

"Ah! W-wait..."

But just as he tried to place that coat over Junko, it caught on one of the other potion bottles sitting on the table.

"Ah!"

The bottle clattered as it fell over. It rolled and dumped the potion on Junko's head where she had crouched down.

"Oh, no..."

"Ee!" shrieked Junko at how cold it was.

But the true shock came soon thereafter.

Akuto had already transformed that potion. Junko's white skin visibly began to turn gold.

"Th-this is a gold dust show[1]!"

The commotion among the students grew. This time, it was the girl as well as the boys.

"Exhibitionism! I can't believe it!"

"This goes beyond horrible. It's almost amazing..."

"Is this an adult eroticism of a previous age?"

The commotion poured down on Junko after she had been transformed into a golden statue.

"S-such humiliation..."

Junko wrapped her arms around herself and began to cry.

Akuto finally succeeded in placing his coat over her, but that did nothing but cause her anger to surge out.

"Y-y-y-you idiot!"

Junko's golden punch struck Akuto.

"I cannot believe I am being punished as well," complained Junko.

"Sorry. I'll try to do most of the work," apologized Akuto admirably.

"But taking off your clothes is the best way of getting a frog out! Ha ha ha," laughed Keena Dorons.

The three of them were headed for the old library. As punishment for disrupting class, they had been ordered to clean the library and sort the

books.

The old library contained paper books. Books that had yet to be digitized were gathered and then turned into data. Instead of discarding the paper books afterwards, they were stored while kept off limits. 20 million such books had been collected.

"The books we need to sort are the most recent ones, right?" asked Junko to change the subject.

Keena answered by reciting what she had read.

"Only a very small number of people want to own actual books. The number of books published for those people is small, but they are still collected. Some of those are digitized and some are not. A lot of the time, the author has not given permission to have the book digitized. That is why modern paper books are usually not digitized and end up in storage forever without being sorted."

"And so we need to sort them and clean up."

"Yes. We are librarians right now."

Keena sounded delighted. She probably could barely wait to touch a paper book.

"I'd heard that people who love books ultimately insist on having paper ones," muttered Akuto and Keena nodded happily.

“That’s right! I’ve never touched a real one, but I’m still really excited! I feel like this is the real, real deal!”

“The real, real deal? The only person I know of that insists on real books is Etou-senpai, but I suppose something you can actually touch would seem more real than simple data. What we read is the writing though, so we get the same information either way.”

—The information we read will never gain any real form. But would the information stored by the gods become real humans if the world were reconstructed?

That thought suddenly came to Akuto. He had heard from Bouichirou during that war that information could gain real form as long as the Law of Identity existed.

—What world do we truly live in? That’s probably something we cannot know from the inside.

And it seemed the Law of Identity was a term referring to Soga Keena. Or more accurately, it referred to some kind of will that would suddenly awaken within her.

“What is with the distrust we have of digitized data? Can we only rely on originality?”

Akuto had been speaking to himself, but Junko tilted her head.

"Sometimes I have no idea what you are talking about. Actually, it happens a lot more than sometimes."

However, Keena Dorons greatly reacted to his words.

"Originality! That's it! That's what I want. Even if I have no memories, I can surely become myself if I read a bunch of books!"

Keena smiled innocently, but for some reason Akuto felt an emotion similar to sadness when he heard it.

Meanwhile, Fujiko had been called in by Korone.

"This is a rare pairing."

Fujiko had entered an empty classroom. Korone had asked her to keep all the students away.

"Indeed. Actively becoming involved in your actions seems as if it would bring a lot of secret information to light. I decided I did not want to increase my workload unnecessarily."

Korone's words were terrible, but she spoke them with perfect calm.

Fujiko of course did not look pleased.

"Yes, you are strictly on the government's side. But I assume you did not call me here to provoke me. It would have to be something important if you are willing to leave Akuto-sama's side while he is taking such an irregular action."

"Yes. I would like to exchange information."

"Regarding Keena Dorons?" asked Fujiko.

Korone nodded.

"Yes. You were joking around during that date, but I am sure you have gathered a fair bit of information on her."

"Of course. But unfortunately, I do not know very much."

"Neither do I. That is why I would like to try a certain method that would be impossible without the two of us working together."

"In other words, you want the black magicians' logs on people's actions. The illegal ones."

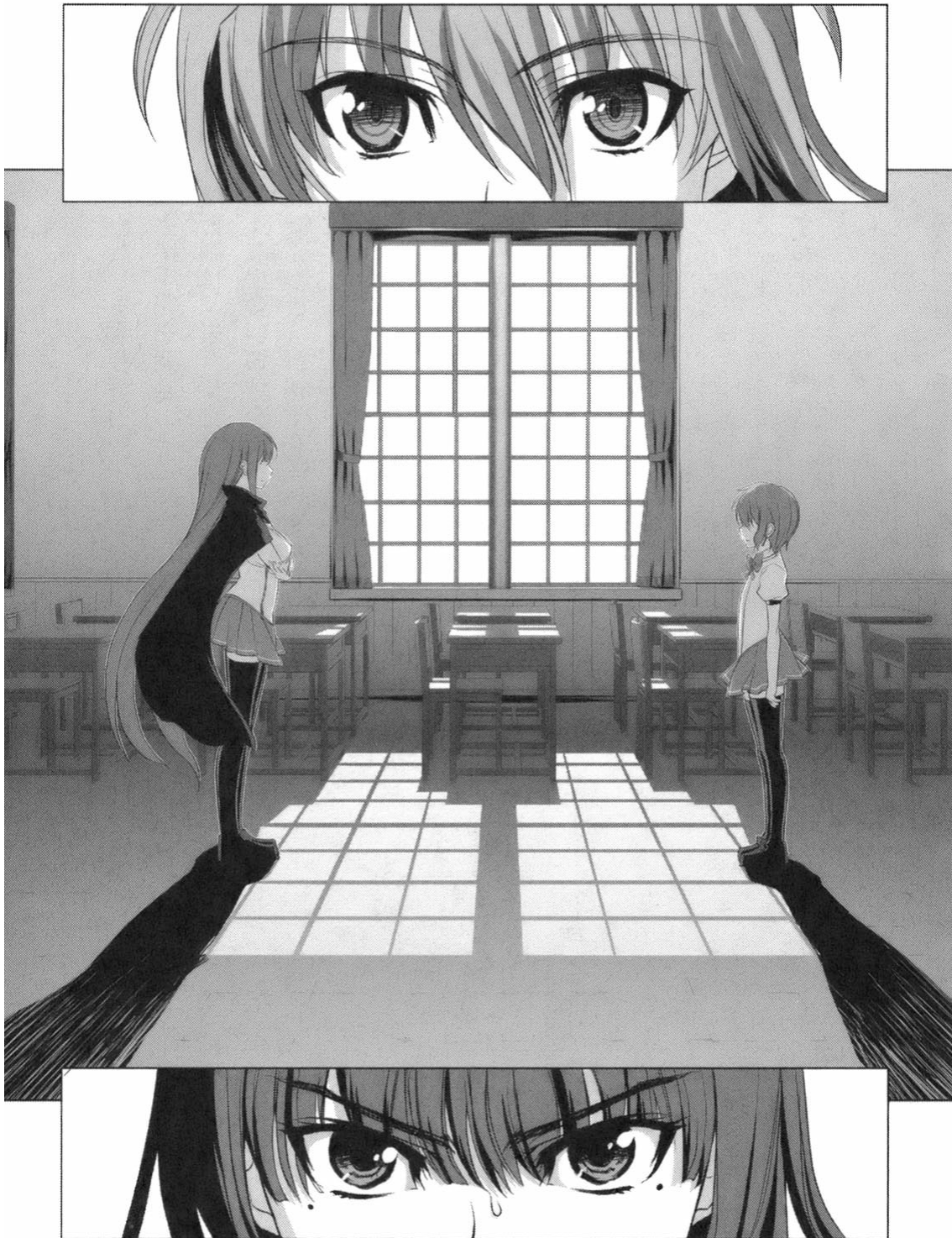
"Yes. That would increase the accuracy of my data."

"You wish to reference the actions of every imperial citizen to check on the data deviation between before and after the war, don't you? If you ask me, that is absurd."

Fujiko grinned.

“Exactly. I am glad you catch on so quickly,” said Korone.

After the war, memories inconvenient to Akuto had disappeared from people’s minds. Someone had erased the memories as they pleased. If there was a correlation between that and Keena Dorons’s appearance...



"I hope you are planning to give me something in exchange," said Fujiko while grinning.

"I thought you would say that. You can have this."

Korone held out a bag of ningyou-yaki.

"I do not want that!"

Fujiko tried to brush aside the bag of ningyou-yaki, but Korone swiftly avoided her hand.

"I also thought you would say that. What I will actually do is overlook your crime of cultivating Sai Akuto's cells."

Fujiko's eyes opened wide.

"I see. You are the only person aware of that who would be able to cause a real problem for me. The logs related to the war were altered after all." Fujiko thought for a bit. "Understood. I accept. I will provide you with limited browsing permissions for accessing the data."

Fujiko opened her student handbook and displayed an address and password on the mana screen. Black magicians had not yet acquired fully open use of magic. They had several domains created in the gods' memory that they used to save life logs. They used primitive codes to exchange the passwords.

Korone's eyes lit up.

"I have accessed the data. I am adding the black magicians' data to my previous calculations. This will increase my accuracy from 90% to 99%."

A few seconds later, the light disappeared from Korone's eyes and she

noded in understanding.

"How did it go?"

"I had already hypothesized this, but now it is almost certain. Keena Dorons is a human created from the data distortion caused by the Law of Identity."

"Wow!"

Keena Dorons's eyes sparkled as she looked back and forth.

The bookshelves filling the vast library were much taller than her. They towered above her in orderly rows like buildings in a futuristic city from old SF.

"Sorry, but our work is over there."

Junko pointed toward a counter to the right of the entrance. Books had been placed in cluttered piles there. There were several hundred of them there. A cart with caster wheels was placed beside the counter and it was overflowing with cluttered piles of books as well. It had been left after someone brought the books in.

"Those poor books."

Keena walked over to the cart and made a pile on the counter using the

books that had fallen off the cart.

"I don't really understand how you feel, but I agree that you should treat things with care."

Akuto began helping Keena.

However, it seemed Keena had not liked what he had said.

"You don't understand why I feel sorry for the books?"

"No, I mean books are not special. I of course think you should take care of your tools."

"That's not it! Books are special!"

Keena began swinging her arms around and passionately objecting, but she did not continue for long.

"I know that is how bibliophiles feel. I'm sorry, but I just don't have that same love for books. My dislike of them may come from people's obsession with stories being too similar to their obsession with the books some of those stories come in. It reminds me of people's belief and faith in the gods who are nothing but a system," explained Akuto.

Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"Don't make this so difficult! Fine! If you hate books, then go on hating them!"

"Sorry. I'll do my best to try to like them."

Akuto picked up a book.

During modern times, only books with elaborate binding were published. The book he randomly picked up had a wonderful leather cover that was dyed red. He flipped through the pages and listened to the rustling of the paper.

—I have to admit, this feels pretty nice. But I don't think Dorons-san knew about this when she fell in love with books.

As Akuto thought about that, someone struck him lightly on the head from behind.

"Do not read the books while sorting them. That should go without saying."

Junko held the spine of a book toward him.

"I suppose so. You'd never get anything done otherwise."

Akuto gave a bitter grin. He looked over at Keena, but she was already lost in reading a large volume sitting on her lap.

"Let's leave her be," said Akuto while smiling at Junko.

Junko gave an exaggerated shrug and smiled back.

"Then you had better do her share of the work."

"I will."

Akuto circled around the counter and checked on the scanner. The manual displayed on the screen said it could instantly scan the contents of a closed book.

"So we have to pass each book through the scanner to get its data."

"The digitized ones will give us a category number, so we just have to transfer them to the bookshelves. That is our job. The real work is moving the books to the bookshelves."

Junko smiled at Akuto.

"Then let's get to it."

Akuto moved out from behind the counter and switched places with Junko.

"She is a human created from the data distortion caused by the Law of

Identity?"

"Yes. You may not believe it, but the Law of Identity has the ability to do such things."

Fujiko and Korone were on their way to the old library.

"Then can the Law of Identity create a new world?"

"Most likely. However, it appears she does not have the power needed to transform this entire world."

"Then we are in an extremely unstable position, aren't we?"

"There is no need to be so pessimistic. Humans have a sense of self as well as free will. Unless their life is physically destroyed in this world, no one's existence can be erased."

"In that case, what does it mean for someone to be a human created from the data distortion caused by the Law of Identity? Does her existence in this world cause any harm?"

"I believe she was born as a human in order to correct the distortion. Her existence itself causes no harm."

"Then why did you say we have to hurry to the old library?"

"It is possible the data alteration to truly correct the distortion is occurring."

"How exactly is this data alteration carried out?"

"A story that 'might have happened like that' will be completed in a virtual alternate dimension," explained Korone.

Fujiko stared back with a blank look.

"What does that mean...?"

"The world was altered in order to hide what Sai Akuto had done. The distortion created by this has taken human form. In other words, the distortion will disappear when she is satisfied."

"When Keena Dorons is satisfied?"

"It seems I do not have time to explain."

Korone stared off into the distance.

"What is it?"

"I have detected a mana fluctuation. The Law of Identity will soon make contact with the distortion. It seems the distortion is being corrected. I will be going on ahead."

Korone drew a transport circle in midair. She then dove into the circle.

"W-wait a second!"

Fujiko stretched out an arm, but Korone had already disappeared inside the circle.

"Please hurry to the library. Although I think you will only be able to watch on from outside."

"H-how irresponsible can you be?" complained Fujiko, but the transport circle had already disappeared from the hallway.

"A-chan, are you working hard?"

Soga Keena came floating into the old library. Her carefree expression made one horribly sleepy just by looking at it.

"Hard enough."

Akuto was standing on a tall ladder and holding several books. He was sorting the books on an empty shelf.

"Do you need any help?"

Akuto shook his head at Keena's offer.

"No thanks. Could you look after Dorons-san instead? She's been reading books this entire time, so she should be fine. Still, we can't keep an eye on her."

"Okay!"

Keena flew off toward the other Keena.

And Akuto continued sorting the books. He focused on his work for a while, but he turned around once more when he heard Soga Keena's voice.

She said something odd.

"Well? Have you decided on your favorite story?" she whispered to the blonde Keena.

Akuto was not close enough to hear a whisper, yet he had definitely heard her.

The blonde Keena sat atop a pile of books and had a green book open on her lap. The red-haired Keena placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Kee-..." began Akuto.

In that instant, the blonde Keena's lips moved as she said something.

As she did, her body gave off a brilliant light that filled Akuto's vision.

"Eh?"

Akuto sank into a white world. As he did, he thought he heard a shout from Junko and the emotionless voice of Korone.

"W-wait. What is going on?"

"It looks like I made it in time. No. Perhaps I should say I managed to be caught up in the middle of it."

In the next instant, Akuto lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was wearing a luxurious frock coat.

"Hm?"

Akuto wondered if Fujiko had put it on him, but that was most likely not the case.

He was in a Western-style bedroom. It contained a rococo dresser and large bed with a canopy. His feet sank into a deep carpet.

"What is going on?"

He focused on his surroundings. The room was large, but he was the only person standing within it.

However, someone was sleeping in the bed. It was Keena Dorons.

"She was reading that book... I guess I should wake her."

Akuto walked over to the bed and stopped in surprise.

Keena did not seem to be wearing anything. Only a thin sheet covered her body. The lines of her body came through all too well.

"Is this an illusion?" he muttered.

He heard a knock and the door opened.

"Excuse me. I know this is an odd thing to say after suddenly entering, but this is not an illusion."

Korone walked in. She wore a maid uniform.

"Korone... Why are you dressed like that? And I take it you understand what is going on here."

Korone nodded.

"I will explain it all from the beginning."

Korone explained that Keena Dorons was a human created from the data distortion caused by the Law of Identity and that she was an existence meant to correct that distortion.

"We were sent here to correct the distortion?"

"This is a virtual alternate dimension. The dimension itself is what we normally use for magical transfers, but it has been altered a bit."

"How has it been altered?"

"We are closed in so we cannot leave. And the dimension has been designed based on the book Keena Dorons was reading."

"The book she was reading?"

Akuto looked around again. They appeared to be in a European noble's mansion.

"It was a literary work illustrating various love stories of a European noble during the 1900s. It was written as an entertainment novel, but appreciation of it grew in a later era. It is now studied as a literary work."

"I see. So to put it simply, we've been trapped in the world of that story?"

"Yes. And that is heavily related to Keena Dorons."

"In what way?"

"She is the distortion in the world. Her disappearance will stabilize the world and free us from this virtual alternate dimension."

"W-wait a second. You mean she... You mean Dorons-san will die?"

Akuto looked over at Keena as she slept. The expression on her face was one of pure happiness. Akuto had never seen someone look more satisfied as they slept.

"Figuratively, yes. However, it will be nothing more than a distortion disappearing," explained Korone calmly.

"You aren't going to tell me to kill her, are you?" asked Akuto worriedly.

"No, I will not. I will tell you to make her disappear. However, she will disappear on her own eventually. That is her duty. That is what she was born to do."

Korone nodded.

—She was born to disappear?

Akuto was conflicted. This meant Keena Dorons had been born in order to save him and she would disappear in order to save him.

"I'm not sure I can do that..."

"Do not worry. The distortion will disappear on its own, so she will receive something suitable in return."

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Akuto.

Korone paused for a moment before explaining.

"The distortion is also people's memories. If those memories are satisfied... That is, if she is satisfied, she will disappear."

—She is people's memories? And if she is satisfied...

Akuto felt as if he had glimpsed the truth of the world that Bouichirou had spoken of back then. If the world was thoroughly inspected, one would find parts that did not add up. And a truly alternate world existed outside of this one that was apparently closely related to the destruction of the world.

"The Law of Identity is regulating this world?"

"How very perceptive of you. However, that does not directly mean this world does not exist. We exist here and we are alive."

"But she is a human, too..."

Akuto looked over at Keena once more.

"Yes, but you can also say this: in this world, humans are supported by the memories of others. No, it is too soon to come to a conclusion. At the very least, no one in this world can prove you are something that only exists in memories, so it is only natural to think you are real."

Korone was an artificial human, so she could speak such frightening theories with absolute calm. However, Akuto was different. He trembled a bit.

"That's scary. But we were born and we are alive. Is that what's important?"

"Yes. The difference for Keena Dorons is that she suddenly became alive. Do not forget that. All of the above is based on a massive number of calculations. It is the truth to a high degree of accuracy."

Akuto let out a breath when he heard that.

"So how do we satisfy her?"

"That is an issue of human emotion, but I can make some predictions based on the patterns of emotions. If we measure the memories based on emotions, the memories are nothing more than a story. That story must be completed. And in a way she will enjoy," said Korone.

—That means...

"I see. We just have to act according to the novel. I'm not a good actor, but I'll just have to do my best."

That was how Akuto interpreted it.

Korone nodded.

"Exactly. But Keena Dorons's satisfaction is what matters, so there is no need to act it out all that perfectly. However, I expect anything that does not exist in the text will not exist in this virtual alternate dimension."

"That's a simple rule."

"There should not be too many problems. The novel is a peaceful one in which we need not worry about dying. We should be able to enjoy acting it out."

"That's good."

Akuto's mood brightened a bit.

But what Korone said next caused him to suddenly pale.

"It will be quite enjoyable. After all, it tells of the love stories of a

European noble. He becomes known for having affairs with many different women and finally enters into a relationship with the count's daughter."

Korone pointed at Keena.

"Eh? I'm the European noble?"

<Oh, honestly! I'm so late!>

Akuto heard a voice from above.

"Eh? What? What?"

He looked around, but there was no one there. He could tell the voice belonged to Fujiko, but she was nowhere to be found.

"Senpai? Where are you?"

"A novel also has the narrative representing the author's point of view. Etou Fujiko arrived late, so she will be playing that role," said Korone.

<Wait. Why are there voices coming from this book?>

"Look at that book. We are inside it. Your duty is to check the text and guide us to the end of the story," explained Korone.

Korone continued explaining, but Fujiko caught on quickly due to the conversation they had had earlier.

<Ahh! If I had been a little sooner, I could have been in a relationship with Akuto-sama!>

"Even if you made it into the story, you would have been nothing more than the heroine's cruel older sister. Please give up and focus on progressing the story," said Korone coolly.

<You are only the maid!>

"Oh? Are you not aware that nobles would have affairs with their maids? Heh heh heh heh heh."

Korone's laugh was plain, but it held an odd sense of intimidation.

Akuto was at a complete loss as to what to do.

"W-wait. Let's stop this."

"If we stop, there is no way to return. We must complete the story."

<Ahh! I will not allow you to do this with Akuto-sama!>

"It does not matter what you will allow. After all, the noble protagonist

has an affair with all of the female characters.”

“W-wait! You’re kidding, right?”

Akuto panicked, but Korone did not respond.

“Now, it is time for the opening. Sai Akuto the noble meets Keena Dorons!”

Korone pointed into empty space.

Act 1

“I meet her? But I’ve already met her.”

Akuto stood confused in the bedroom. Korone was not in this scene, so she left. To start with, Akuto did not know why he was in that room.

<The protagonist walked into the wrong room after drinking until morning at a party in the count’s residence!>

Fujiko’s irritated voice descended from above.

“I see... Then I guess I should be staggering. Um... I am so drunk...”

<Isn't that acting a little too bad?>

"How should I know!? I'm not a professional," complained Akuto.

Keena suddenly sat up from where she had been happily sleeping.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my bedroom!? Kyah! How rude! Get out! I will call for someone!"

Keena had already read the book, so her acting was perfect. In fact, she may not have been aware she was acting.

When faced with that realistic acting, Akuto accidentally returned to his true self.

"My apologies! I had no intention of frightening you. It's just...I was charmed by how lovely your face looked as you slept."

<Akuto-sama... That was not acting, was it? Then why did it match the protagonist's line down to the letter?>

"...Are you serious?"

Akuto could not help but fall into self-loathing. However, the story continued before he could get too depressed.

"Such frivolous speech! You are no proper man!"

Keena hurriedly covered her exposed chest and spoke harshly.

"I may be a frivolous man, but I was not lying. Now, if you will excuse me, the night is not yet over. You need to get back to sleep."

Akuto hurried out of the room.

And he spoke worriedly to some unknown area above him.

"Senpai, was that good?"

<It was perfect. Are you sure you did not read this book beforehand?>

"Qu-quite sure..."

As he stood confused in the hallway, someone spoke to him from behind.

"B-b-b-brother..."

This person's voice was incredibly nervous.

Akuto turned around in surprise and then stared dumbfounded. He found Junko standing in a gorgeous dress.

"Brother?"

Akuto was surprised by how different this was from how she usually dressed. He also did not know where to look. The chest of her dress was cut very low and her breasts were pushed up by the corset she wore below.

"Y-you idiot! What is with that look in your eyes!?"

Junko tried to hit Akuto, but Fujiko stopped her.

<Stop! The two of you are siblings! Hattori-san, you already established that, remember?>

"B-but, senpai... I am not used to wearing this kind of clothing...and this outfit is indecent..."

<Do not complain to me! If it bothers you that much, why not swap places with me! I will show you how to properly wear a dress like that!>

Fujiko sounded angry.

"C-calm down, senpai. Let's put up with this and advance the story," said Akuto timidly before Fujiko loudly interrupted him.

<You wrap your arm around her shoulders like lovers and exit!>

"L-like lovers? But we're siblings."

<Do not complain to me! It seems that is the kind of siblings you are!>

"H-how indecent is this story?"

Junko blushed and began to tremble, but she still leaned up against Akuto's shoulder.

"W-wait, Hattori-san..."

"Call me Junko. I am your younger sister."

"B-but...Okay, J-Junko..."

Akuto was flustered, but Junko pressed herself up against him even further.

"W-we need to walk. We have no other choice if we are to advance the story. We have no other choice..."

Even as she made that excuse, a hint of satisfaction appeared on Junko's face.

<Ah! You just thought of a way to benefit from this, didn't you!?!>

"You are not even a character in this, so keep quiet. W-wrap your arm around my shoulder...brother."

"Y-you won't hit me...will you?"

Akuto placed a hand on Junko's shoulder. And once he did, he realized the dress did not cover her shoulders. He was touching her bare skin.

"Ah...S-sorry."

"Y-you idiot! Who would apologize for that?" said Junko as she placed her own hand over Akuto's.

<I-I need to find a way inside there!>

"K-keep quiet out there."

Junko urged Akuto to begin walking.

As they walked off, Keena Dorons's head was peering out from her bedroom door.

"H-he has a lover... No, that means nothing to me."

Keena did a splendid job of showing a wavering heart.

<Okay! This scene is complete! Get away from each other!>

Fujiko's desperate shout reverberated through the hallway.

Act 2

<The two meet each other again by coincidence. Let's see... Akuto-sama witnesses an evil deed of Keena's father, the count, so he is being pursued by the count's men. During his flight, he hides in...in Keena's skirt?>

Fujiko sounded hysteric.

"Wait, wait. I can't do that... And what kind of literature is this?"

Akuto was confused as well.

<Akuto-sama, I hate to say it, but there are actually several splendid works of literature with scenes of hiding inside skirts.>

"I-I see..."

<However, that does not mean you should just-...Oh, it is starting!>

As Fujiko shouted, three men wielding swords approached Akuto.

“Wah!”

Akuto frantically ran away.

He knew where he had to run to, but he could not help but complain because he wanted to avoid going there.

“C-can’t I just blow them away with magic?”

“No, you cannot. It is against the rules and you cannot use magic here anyway,” explained a maid who happened to be passing by.

“You certainly appeared out of nowhere, Korone... Oh, I get it. A maid does not look unnatural in any scene within the estate.”

Akuto was impressed, but it did not improve his situation. As he fled, he made his way to Keena’s room where she was wearing a dress.

“Wah!”

“Kyah!”

“Shh. I am being chased. Um...Is there anywhere I could hide? Preferably a very normal hiding spot.”

Akuto altered his lines to avoid hiding in the skirt, but he was powerless in front of Keena who wanted to complete the story.

"Th-there is nowhere to hide in this room. N-no, wait. There is one place!"

Keena blushed and she lifted up the skirt of her dress and the petticoat underneath. This exposed her healthy legs and her panties.

"Wah!"

Akuto averted his gaze. However, Keena did not lower her skirt and the footsteps of his pursuers drew near.

"W-wait. What am I supposed to do?"

Akuto was frozen in place.

And...

"Wham!"

A maid who happened to be passing by shoved Akuto forward. He fell down and rolled into Keena's skirt.

She lowered her skirt and it completely covered Akuto.

"Milady, did you see an intruder around here?"

"He went that way."

After that short conversation, the footsteps grew more distant.

"Whew."

It was too dark to see anything, but Akuto still had his eyes squeezed shut. Relieved that it was safe, he tried to come out, but something soft held him in place. He quickly realized that "something" was Keena's thighs.

He could feel Keena's body heat over his entire body.

"W-wait!"

Akuto struggled.

"Ah! Please get out of there!" screamed Keena.

"Get out? I'm the one that wants to..."

Akuto trailed off as a fist struck his head through the skirt. Once he realized what that meant, Akuto cleared his throat and delivered his line.

"U-um... Excuse me. I...I am concerned that I am still being pursued. It is possible you have deceived me."

"Oh, my. Not only are you cowardly, but you are rude as well. How could you doubt the courage I showed in lifting my skirt!?"

After giving her part of the performance, Keena loosened her thighs and lifted up her skirt.

Akuto stood up. He was unable to look her straight in the face. However, Keena held his cheeks between her hands and forced him to look at her.

"This is the second time you have been rude to me," said Keena angrily before sticking her tongue out mischievously.

—I see. She isn't completely lost in this. She knows it's all an act.

Keena's expression was actually quite lively. She must have been truly enjoying this make-believe.

"And I will apologize as many times as it takes. You are both brave and beautiful."

Akuto played his part and winked at Keena.

She smiled happily, but her tone of voice remained angry.

"Do you mean you plan to see me naked again? You are both cowardly and covered in dust."

Keena and Akuto smiled at each other.

<Ah! Is it just me or are they creating a really nice mood?>

"I am just a maid who happens to be passing by, but it is the elder person's duty to forgive small things like this. Now, on to Act 3!"

Act 3

<Umm, the two continue their pure relationship involving a hint of romance. However, Akuto-sama casually enters into sexual relationships with women he does not love. Eh? Wait! This is filled with sex scenes!>

Fujiko started to panic.

"I am just a maid who happens to be passing by, but I will be attacked from behind while I change the flowers in this vase."

Korone placed both hands on a vase on a table while sticking out her hips.

"Now do it!"

"Don't say that..."

Akuto actually flinched back this time.

"But if you do not attack me, the story will not continue."

Korone moved her hips seductively.

"Please stop doing that with that expressionless look on your face..."

"The text says nothing about the maid's expression."

"Of course not. Why would it? ...Wait, senpai! How exactly is this scene described?"

A good idea had clearly come to Akuto.

<How exactly...? Do you want me to read it? Um...It says you attack her from behind like a wild beast and fiercely satisfy your desires.>

"In that case...!"

Akuto then attacked Korone's backside with fierce intensity.

"Ahh, stop. Please stop."

"Take this! And this!"

"Ahh, how cruel. My ass... How could you hit me on the ass?" said Korone disinterestedly.

Akuto was spanking Korone.

"Will this fiercely satisfy your desires?" asked Korone.

Akuto nodded.

"Your selfishness sometimes makes me angry."

"Ah...Ow. Master, stop! It's my first time!"

<Well, I suppose that is one way around it. Okay... Next is the scene with your sister.>

"I-I have a bad feeling about this. What does it say?"

<You enter the bed with her without any clothes on and grope each other. You stick your finger into Junko's pink flower bud, but the petals are already quite wet. She then guides you inside and moans as you enter her. ...Wait, what are you making me say!?!>

"This is one hell of a piece of literature..."

"It was released as an entertainment novel."

"W-wait a minute! It jumps to that when it is my turn!?"

Junko's face was already quite red and she was preparing to hit Akuto.

<I-I would sleep with him without hesitation! This is the problem with you innocent girls! Ho ho ho.>

Fujiko seemed quite composed for how much she had blushed while describing the passage.

"No, let's think up a way out of this."

Akuto began thinking with a serious expression.

"Y-you do not need to think that hard... A-as long as we find a way around the 'guiding you inside' part, I will allow you to go...rather far. I-If all you do is touch..."

Junko spoke quietly with her head hanging down, but Akuto did not hear her.

"I've got it. We might be able to get around it like this!"

"Th-there is no way around getting in the bed together naked, is there?"

After clearing everyone else from the room, Junko climbed into the bed and stripped off her clothes underneath the blanket. A thick negligee slid off the side of the bed.

Akuto turned away and answered Junko.

"No. This can't be helped, but I'll do my best not to touch you. I'm coming in."

Akuto then climbed into the bed on the opposite side from Junko.

"Y-your legs touched me a bit. And you did not see me when you flipped up the blanket, did you?"

"D-don't worry. You have your back turned, so all I would see is your back and I'm used to seeing that."

"You idiot! You do not have to say that!" yelled Junko angrily.

"S-sorry..."

Akuto apologized and quickly removed his clothes under the blanket.

The bed was large, but his hands still ended up touching Junko's back as he stripped. He ended up gently stroking up the center of her back.

"Pyah!" she cried and arched her back.

She quickly balled up and began trembling.

"Oh, sorry. Did it tickle?"

In his desire to apologize, Akuto reflexively held a hand out toward her. This time, his hand stroked her waist.

"Hyahhh!"

Junko twisted her body around.

"S-sorry. I guess it does tickle..."

"Th-that is not...it... Just stay still," insisted Junko while trying to catch her breath.

"Oh. S-sorry."

Akuto lowered his head because he did not understand.

After a moment, Junko spoke in a trembling voice.

"O-okay. Let's do this."

"Right."

The two of them gulped.

Akuto reached a hand out toward Junko.

Junko squeezed her eyes shut and turned toward Akuto.

And...

"Uuh... This is pathetic. Even though this is all we are doing... No, because this is all we are doing, I feel like I am losing something important as a girl..."

"Yeah. It feels somehow pathetic to me too."

The two of them had their shoulders sticking out from the blanket. They reached over and groped at each other's hair. Akuto then poked his finger into the rose bud they had prepared ahead of time.



"It's a good thing we had the scene with the flowers in the vase earlier."

"Are the petals nice and wet?"

"I suppose..."

Akuto pinched the rose bud between his fingers and stuck a finger in between the petals.

"Even doing this feels really inappropriate," groaned Junko as she watched the motion of Akuto's finger.

"Let's get this over with. Okay. You have to guide my finger into your ear. Don't forget to moan."

Akuto stuck his pinky finger in Junko's ear.

"Hyah! Uuh...This is horrible... This is more humiliating then doing it for real... Uuh...uuh..."

It was mostly due to humiliation, but she was certainly moaning.

And then the door to the bedroom opened.

"Akuto-sama, as promised... Wait, what are you doing!? Pfhh! Ah ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Keena began laughing as she burst into the room.

"Um, you aren't supposed to be laughing here," warned Akuto and Keena suppressed her laughter.

"R-right. Um, I cannot believe you, Akuto-sama! How indecent!"

"P-please wait, Keena! She is only..."

"No, you knew how I felt! I will tell father of this betrayal!"

Keena ran away.

"Wait..."

Akuto reached out toward the door and sat up. As he did, the blanket flipped up and exposed Junko's body.

"Y-you idiot! Th-the blanket!"

"Ah! Sorry..."

As Akuto frantically fixed the blanket, his hand touched Junko's waist.

"Pyaaah!"

<Ah! I am so jealous! If it means having Akuto-sama touch you so familiarly, next time I will-...!>

"Actually, I think we have witnessed the birth of a machine that will continue touching girls' erogenous zones for all eternity if no outside force stops it."

Korone entered the room as she cut off Fujiko.

"Now, cover yourself with this towel and put on your clothes. It is time for the next scene."

<In the next scene, Akuto-sama is worrying over which girl to choose.>

"Um? Between my sister, the maid, and the count's daughter?" asked Akuto as he dressed.

<Yes. However, you decide to give up on the maid and you learn from her that you are not blood related to your sister. That is how the story goes.>

"Everyone but the noble is to leave the room. Act 4 is about to begin!"

Korone once more pointed into empty space.

Act 4

"The truth is, the two of you are not blood related. Your family took in your sister at a young age when her noble family fell on hard times," said Korone in a perfect monotone.

"So that is why we were so attracted to each other. This means I must

choose one of the two!" said Akuto as he delivered his line.

Akuto knew little about acting, but he could still feel the weight of this line. And so...

"Do I really have to choose someone here?" he whispered to Korone.

"What do you mean? Do you wish to choose everyone? It is not too late to redo the scene now. Or do you wish to choose no one? The story will never advance if you do that."

"That's what I mean. I don't want the story to advance," said Akuto.

Korone shook her head.

"You must choose, master. That is the responsibility you have to those women."

That was obviously a line from the novel, but Akuto shook his head.

"I know I have a responsibility, but won't the story end even if I choose my sister?"

"Are you saying you will change the story and give it a different ending?"

"Yes. Would this virtual alternate dimension close if I did that?"

Korone shook her head.

"I doubt that would satisfy Keena Dorons."

"But if she is satisfied, she'll disappear, right?"

"Yes. She is a distortion, so that is only natural," replied Korone coldheartedly.

"She is a human," said Akuto with a hint of displeasure.

And Korone answered without the slightest hesitation.

"Are you saying her disappearance would not be a problem if she were a L'Isle-Adam?"

"Please do not be so disagreeable. Of course I don't want you to disappear."

"In that case, I wish you would have slept with me instead of spanking me..."

Korone's jokes usually had an effect, but Akuto did not respond this time.

"That isn't what I mean. I was thinking it wouldn't be all that bad if we

didn't satisfy her and stayed trapped here in this dimension."

"Even if that was possible, you are wrong if you think that is in her best interest."

"Eh?"

"Whether in this virtual alternate dimension or not, she will disappear soon. And if she is in here, it will likely end without her experiencing anything she truly wanted."

"No..."

"In the end, this is all you can do for her. Tell her you love her, even if it is just an act. The rest of us will allow it just this once."

"Why do I need your permission? But I guess that is all I can do. Understood. I will choose her. I will choose Keena Dorons."

Akuto gave a nod.

And the final scene of action and romance began.

Keena was imprisoned in the tower while the count committed further evil. However, Akuto used splendid swordplay to corner the count and defeat him.

Akuto's actions had been just, but the fact that he had killed her father weighed heavily on Keena. Also, one of the count's subordinates destroyed the evidence and persistently pursued Akuto so he could take over the count's position.

Just as it seemed Akuto would be killed, Keena awoke to her love and saved him.

"Akuto-sama! Stab your sword into the crack in that stone! That will cause the tower to crumble!"

"But Keena! It will collapse with you inside!"

"That is fine! I do not care what happens to me as long as you survive!"

Keena was resolute.

Akuto stabbed the sword into the stone.

With a great rumble, the tower crumbled. And with Keena inside.

However, Akuto rushed up the tower even as it crumbled. He embraced Keena and leapt out into the air.

"Akuto-sama!"

"Keena!"

Keena's joyous expression shined in the morning sun. They stood alone on the cliff the tower had stood on. As they stared at each other, no one came to interfere.

"Ah...Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha! That was fun. Really, really fun," said Keena as she laughed.

"It was. I never liked this kind of hackneyed story, but I might need to rethink my opinion on that," said Akuto as he caught his breath.

"I was...looking only at you," said Keena in a serious tone of voice.

—That's right. All stories have an ending.

Akuto did not know if Keena's words were from the novel or from her heart.

"In this kind of story...it may be rude to say it, but..."

Akuto trailed off as Keena placed a finger over his lips.

"I know that you are rude."

"Yes... It seems I am. I..."

Akuto started to say something again, but Keena shook her head.

"It's fine. I was born for your sake and I will disappear in your arms. That is destiny. Right?"

"Destiny...?"

"No, I know. I alone am a person from within a story. I was different from the rest of you from the beginning. It was only for a short time, but you gave me everything I wanted."

"I didn't do anything! The time we spent together was so short! We didn't even have time to really get to know each other."

"No, you gave me everything. The story is complete. This is the end."

"But why do you and you alone have to disappear?"

"Real humans must not live within a story. However, I am allowed to live within a story. That is the difference. I am not disappearing. I alone will remain in eternal happiness. And it is all because you gave me that happiness."

"But I can't stand this. It's my fault. It's all because I asked the Law of Identity for my own freedom..."

"A story is a short dream. You must not live within a novel."



"But surely I can-..."

"Do not be sad. Once the story comes to an end, we will have eternal happiness."

Keena wrapped her arms around Akuto's neck.

Their lips drew near.

However, Akuto never felt her soft lips on his own. Instead, warm tears flowed onto his cheek. He did not know if they were Keena's tears or his own.

There was no longer anyone in his arms.

—A-ahh...

He turned around and found Korone and Junko standing there.

"She has gone somewhere else," said Akuto.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on the floor of the old library.

—Hm? What? What happened?

Akuto sat up. Junko lay unconscious to his right, Korone to his left, and Fujiko behind him.

—Oh. We were sorting the books as a punishment and a pile collapsed on us.

And Soga Keena was in his arms. She sat on Akuto as if straddling him

while she looked at him with sleepy eyes devoid of any malice.

"A-chan, good morning."

"Good morning... What happened?"

Akuto rubbed Keena's head as he tried to call back some half-remembered thought in the back of his mind.

"Nothing happened," said Keena.

She simply stared at Akuto with her wide, round eyes.

"Okay. If you say so, that must be the case. Hey, why is it you sometimes look really cruel?" asked Akuto.

Keena blinked at him as if she did not understand.

"Cruel? I'm not cruel. But A-chan, you only get to cheat on me this one time," she said before embracing him.

"Cheat on you? What do you mean? I haven't cheated on you. For one thing, we're not going out."

Keena pushed Akuto to the ground.

That sound awoke Junko.

"Hm? I feel like I just had a horrible nightmare... Wait, what are you two doing!?"

"Ahhh! I came here because I was worried, Akuto-sama! And just as I feared, that girl is clinging to you again!"

"Who was it that pulled off the trick of knocking a L'Isle-Adam unconscious?"

"Oh, everyone's awake! Hey, it was amazing! The books all came tumbling down! They made a huge boom!" exclaimed Keena as she spread her arms wide.

For a while afterwards, Akuto lived his everyday life with a nagging feeling that he was forgetting something.

That feeling gradually vanished, but he had gained a new habit. He began picking up paper books and reading some of the stories inside.

And whenever he flipped through the pages of those paper books, he felt some kind of emotion squeezing at his chest. For some reason, that feeling was always strongest when he read a story with a happy ending.

"What am I trying to find in these stories?"

As he muttered that question to no one in particular, the wind flipped

through the pages as if trying to answer his question.

Notes:

Jump up ↑ A performance in which the performer dances with their entire body coated in gold dust.

Chapter 4: An Afternoon of Playing with Dolls

A girl sat within a room filled with the non-autonomous L'Isle-Adams known as dolls.

She was only about 10 years old, but that room was clearly too bizarre for a child of her age. Dozens of mana screens were open. They were the only things in the room other than the dolls.

It was not a very amusing room.

"There is little amusement in a work of literature you have already thoroughly analyzed. Ha ha."

The girl spoke into one of the mana screens. That screen displayed a doll. From the shape of the room, the arrangement of the table, and the other men visible on the screen, it seemed the doll was taking part in a meeting.

And the next screen over was clearly showing what that doll could see.

This girl was the person who went by the codename 2V. She had belonged to the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office underneath Bouichirou and was currently working to gain control of that office. She could control dozens of dolls simultaneously and was a specialist at spying. Not even the other expert investigators belonging to CIMO 8 had seen her true face.

<Enough about literature. What does that have to do with our meeting?
> asked one of the men in irritation.

"My bad. Don't get so mad. It has a lot to do with the meeting. I have witnessed a ground-breaking method of using the virtual alternate dimension."

2V displayed yet another screen. It showed footage of Constant Magic Academy's old library. A few of the students there were dolls.

<The virtual alternate dimension? That dimension used to magically transfer objects and used to defend the devices of the gods?>

"Generally, the virtual alternate dimension has nothing in it. Of course, anything brought into it can be arranged as you see fit. That is why killing someone inside one or luring people inside to start a war is an inefficient method except for using it as a defense system."

2V's speech did not match her young age. It was possible she was not the age she appeared to be.

<And?>

"It seems the demon king's wavelength...no, it is actually the wavelength created when the Law of Identity and the demon king's mana waves resonate. At any rate, that wavelength seems able to influence the virtual alternate dimension. So if you abduct the Law of Identity, you can bring a concept such as a video or a story into the virtual alternate dimension."

<I'm not sure I understand...>

"I can leave the details of the theory until later. To put it simply, you can enter inside a movie or video game."

<And that's why you brought up literature? Wait, but we were discussing a strategy...>

"Hah hah! You still don't get it? We can create a field where we write the rules. And when the demon king steps inside it...he is a simple human."

2V's words – or more accurately, 2V's dolls words – sent excitement running through the meeting room.

<So that's it! Then we can kill him.>

<We won't have to worry about another god falling victim to him!>

<We can restore order. This will allow us to suppress the expansion of the demon king worshipers.>

"Exactly. I would like to make a draft of a plan."

2V promised to submit a plan a week later and the doll left the meeting room.

"Now then. Abducting the Law of Identity won't be easy, but I could always handle it myself. At any rate, those cells of Sai Akuto's that Rubbers brought back should come in handy."

2V rolled up the sleeves of her plain white shirt, crossed her legs which wore gray slacks, and turned toward a different mana screen.

Afterword

Thank you once again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

Here is the sixth volume. This story is a small rest in the middle. But from the comedy side of things, this type of story is the proper course for this series. I have a feeling the initial standard set for this series was to continually put out novels like this.

But even if this was meant as a rest, I feel that its theme touched on some oddly important issues. I should have realized this earlier, but when writing a story however you want it, it's important to take it easy. You might want to ask if that means I have been writing all this series without giving it much thought, but try to restrain yourself.

Oh, and even if this is the sixth volume, I made it so it can be read starting here. If you just so happened to pick this one up, feel free to read it.

Now I will introduce how the series is expanding into other media.

A drama CD was released by Beatniks Inc. on February 25, 2009. A sequel might be released as well, so please check it out.

Also, the first volume of Itou-san's manga version has been released by Akita Shoten. Some bookstores might place it next to this book, so please buy them together.

And now for my thanks.

First, my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. I included a lot of scenes that appealed to many different tastes, but his illustrations exceeded my expectations. I couldn't help but grin when I saw them. Oh, and congratulations on your move. I will stop by to visit some time.

Next, my editor Ohashi-san. I think I have settled into the position of a constantly late author, but I am doing my best to speed myself up. Please stick with me next time as well.

Lastly, I give my thanks to everyone involved with the drama CD and everything else. You have helped me out so much.

Now, next up is the seventh volume. It will have a new story development. It looks like we can enjoy this for quite a while longer!





み010207
水城正太郎
いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT7
HJ文庫
HOBBY JAPAN



9784894259294



1920193006193

ISBN978-4-89425-929-4

C0193 ¥619E

定価：[本体619円]+税



2Vは仮想空間内での阿九斗抹殺計画を実行に移すため、天才研究者・木多淑恵を巻き込むことに成功する。学院ごと淑恵の作ったゲーム世界に取り込まれてしまった阿九斗は生徒を救うため、そしてゲームをクリアするために、魔王として生徒と戦う破目になってしまう。しかし仮想空間内には、さらにルールを超える隠された秘密があった。

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT7





「……いや、君、意外と楽しんでるだろ」

けーな
クラス：神官
HP $\frac{20}{20}$
Lv: 10
筋力: 6
魔力: 18
兵力: 10000

阿九斗
クラス：魔王
HP $\frac{9999}{9999}$
Lv: 99
筋力: 25
魔力: 25
兵力: 200000



「ご命令をいただければ、この魔将軍ころね、
反逆者どもを血祭りにあげて差し上げます」

ころね
クラス：魔術師
HP $\frac{200}{200}$
Lv: 20
筋力: 15
魔力: 20
兵力: 100000



「封印の地に足を踏み入れる
ことは何人たりともまかりらん」
少女がどこか幼い声をあげた。



登場人物紹介

ころね

.....
阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ポシエットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。阿九斗をからかうのが大好き。

そが 曾我けーな

.....
落ちこぼれな天然少女で阿九斗に懐いている。お米が大好き。魔法は苦手だが空を飛ぶことと姿を消すことはできる。

さいあく と 紗伊阿九斗

.....
将来「魔王」になると(再び?) 予言された「善良な」主人公。魔王戦争も一段落したところだが彼の困難は続く。



はっとりじゅんこ
服部 純子

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘でカエルが苦手。



えとうふみこ
江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師にして薬物使い。学園のマドンナとして君臨するが実は陰謀が大好き。



りりお
リリオ

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。喧嘩っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。



みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメーカー。阿九斗の発言をいちいち誤解し阿九斗の悪名を高めるのに一役を買っている。

Prologue

A certain genius girl did not think of herself as a genius.

Kita Yoshie worked under her father, who was the high priest of the god Megis, while also immersing herself in the math, video games, and programming she did for fun. And she did all this while only 17 years old.

At the age of eight, she had stopped reading storybooks and become interested in poetry and math, but she quickly read all of the well-known works. In order to read poetry in other languages, she taught herself several languages using an assortment of different books, and by the age of 10, she had learned seven languages. Due to the books she read in that process, she had already learned what one would normally learn in school. The empire's schools did not allow one to skip grades, so she grew sick of school there and transferred overseas. She graduated university at 15 and returned, hoping to become a high priest. However, she finally realized that graduation from a magic school was needed for that position.

She decided reentering an academy would be a waste of time, so she asked her father to work as his assistant. She decided to participate in government in her own way by constructing an ideal society in which everyone could live fulfilling their interests and hobbies.

Yoshie began by posting on online political message boards with a false name and debating various issues there. She knew most of those debates ended with futilely flinging insults at each other, but she still succeeded in making a name for herself.

She made a name for herself online using the male name Yoshihiko.

No matter how far communications technology advanced, the people of the empire would not reveal their identities to anyone but the gods. It was taboo to expose personal information or one's unhidden face and Yoshie used that fact to its fullest.

After about a year, a page run by Yoshihiko gained political influence and his opinions and research became well known.

Yoshihiko proclaimed the extreme idea of constructing a society where everyone could live without any motivation. His ideas were said to be nonsense, but the research he put into accomplishing it gathered attention from others in that field.

That field was virtual alternate dimension research.

The virtual alternate dimension was commonly referred to as a 4th dimensional space. Researchers' understanding of it was as follows: "we don't know why, but there is an infinitely vast space adjacent to our dimension." It was thought to be dangerous to remain within it, so it was usually used to temporarily transfer oneself or objects or to trap intruders as a defensive panic room.

Yoshie (and therefore Yoshihiko) thought the virtual alternate dimension might be controllable and had been conducting research. She had announced a few pieces of data that made her suspect that space could actually be changed as much as necessary by a human will.

For that reason, the military, political, and financial worlds had all focused on her research. If the space could be used effectively, its value would be incalculable. However, that research was a means to achieve Yoshie's goal as well. She was convinced she could create a world where one could live while doing nothing but sleep all day. She wanted a world where every imperial citizen could laze around all day without issue.

She did not realize the true importance of her research. Also, she did not think of herself as a genius. No one would have thought those two things would come together and lead to her taking a drastic action.

On that day, Yoshie was receiving a government worker.

That in itself was not unusual. She was officially nothing more than a clerk who carried out routine tasks for the god Megis.

She wore multipurpose goggles over her unkempt hair and her expression was somewhat vacant. Yoshie was sitting in a café within the temple of Megis. The interior was splendidly made as the greatest common divisor of many different religious styles. It looked like a mixture of Greek, Baroque, and Muslim. That was simply how the temple of Megis was made.

Sitting in front of Yoshie was a man who could only be described as a salaryman. He wore a gray suit and had his hair parted on the side. His face was the kind one would forget after taking a few steps away from him. Yoshie had asked his name, but she had already forgotten even that.

However, Yoshie's eyes opened wide when she heard what he said after

a simple greeting.

"I would like you to create a program that can control the virtual alternate dimension."

Yoshie had not announced she was Yoshihiko. She had indeed pursued working on the programs of the gods, but very few people knew she was a genius in that field because most of her schooling had been done overseas. No one should have been requesting she write a program. Unless, of course, they had realized she was Yoshihiko.

"Is that an official request to the temple of Megis?" asked Yoshie to feign ignorance.

She had been told this meeting concerned a preliminary adjustment from the government. It was only natural to assume the request was directed toward the temple and not toward her. Then again, this man's tone of voice had not held that nuance at all.

"No, this is a request for you, Yoshihiko-san," readily declared the salaryman, showing he had no intention of beating around the bush.

Yoshie readily accepted this turn of events. She naturally disliked putting in any unneeded effort.

"I see. I would like to know for sure whether this is an official or unofficial issue. I was initially told this was a request from the government."

"It is official. This job comes from the government. Specifically, the Cabinet Office. It is a top secret job, though."

"Top secret? I'd prefer it if you avoided that kind of unclear word. What do you mean?"

"This is an unofficial project from the government. It was me personally that realized you are Yoshihiko. Is that enough?"

The salaryman smiled.

Yoshie nodded in admiration.

"Ohh, that's amazing. So someone figured it out. Then can you tell me who you are? That smile looks unnatural to me, so I get the feeling you're hiding something."

Yoshie spoke bluntly because she was not the type to hold back about being direct. The salaryman's smile deepened and he created a V-sign with each hand. Most people would feel they were being mocked, but Yoshie smiled in amusement.

"Oh? Most people get angry when I do this. That reaction is rare."

"What's wrong with that? I just thought it was funny."

"I am glad to hear it. I suppose there is a first time for everything. At any rate, this is my codename. I am known as 2V."

"2V of the cabinet's intelligence office. I've heard of you."

Yoshie recognized the name. Naturally, she had only heard rumors from the government workers she dealt with in her work. 2V's face had never been seen in public.

"Yes. I apologize for using a codename, but it should not be a problem because this name works well enough most of the time."

2V's tone grew more informal. Yoshie felt as if she were speaking with someone similar to herself.

"That's fine, but how did you find out about me?"

"I had someone track down the location of the transmissions. That is a power only a member of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office can take advantage of."

"I see. But if you can do that much, do you even need me? But if you have a good deal for me, I am willing to listen."

"I of course have a good deal for you. I have no idea what a normal person would think of it, though."

"I'm shocked you would imply I'm not normal."

"My apologies. But it is true, isn't it? Anyway, the 'good deal' I have for

you is this.”

2V slid a mana screen toward Yoshie. She spread it out before her eyes and read through the text.

It was information from a spy inside Constant Magic Academy. That said, this so-called spy was actually an official student that had entered the academy through the official procedures. They were merely promised a job after graduation if they reported on information within the academy.

“Fwohh! This is...!” cried out Yoshie in surprise.

Several people had been sealed within the virtual alternate dimension using Soga Keena as an intermediary. Also, the virtual alternate dimension had been altered by a free will. Yoshie instantly understood the implications of this.

“Amazing, isn’t it? Truly amazing.”

“It is, it is,” said Yoshie as she nodded repeatedly.

“It means there seems to be a way of controlling the virtual alternate dimension. And we are beginning to understand how to do so,” said 2V.

Yoshie immediately responded.

“Is it this Soga Keena person? Did her unique mana waves cause this?”

"It seems so. She can apparently alter the virtual alternate dimension. If we could copy her mana waves..."

By the time 2V got that far, Yoshie had already pulled her goggles down and begun thinking with 2V's report in hand. She was muttering something.

"Fwoh! This is getting interesting. So many ideas are coming to mind. If I could implement it with a program, I might be able to create a dimension where everyone can just laze around all day."

2V shrugged and slid a mana screen toward Yoshie that contained contact information.

"You seem motivated enough, but please contact me just in case."

And then 2V left.

Technically, 2V did not leave from in front of Yoshie.

2V's will could be transferred between many different dolls. That will had moved on to a different doll.

2V specialized in a method of controlling several dolls, which were artificial humans with no will of their own. The dolls not being actively controlled could carry out simple autonomous actions.

2V had just transferred to a doll standing in a lab at Imperial University. That doll was waiting for a man in a lab coat to speak. That man was leaning forward in the cramped space between a rectangular device similar to a white refrigerator and a steel rack.

The man in the lab coat was reading the values displayed on the refrigerator-like machine's screen and he spoke without turning around.

"So, 2V. You say these are cells from the demon king's body?"

"Yes. I believe they are real. As I said, be careful with the mana waves emitted by them," said 2V.

This doll also looked like a fairly forgettable salaryman.

These demon king cells had been stolen by the man known as Rubbers who also belonged to the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office or CIMO 8. The cells had been cultivated from Sai Akuto, who was to become the demon king.

"The mana waves aren't useful for anything other than using demonic beasts, but I did find something interesting."

The man in the lab coat turned around and tossed a mana screen toward 2V.

He was also a member of CIMO 8. The footage he tossed over

contained a map and some data.

"I recognized this mana wave pattern, so I did some research."

"So what's with the map? Will I understand once I read the data?"

"You're as lazy as ever. At least read the data first. But I guess it would be hard to understand without some explanation. That is where the demon king was born."

"Where he was born? You mean he's human, too?"

"No, that isn't what I mean. I'm referring to the very first demon king."

2V gave a whistle at that.

"Wow. So it's hereditary."

"Don't jokingly say inaccurate things. It pisses me off."

"Yes, I understand, I understand. You mean he is a weapon created by someone."

"Exactly. I still don't know if the current demon king happened to have a bomb in his genes or is a product of artificial insemination, but that is the place where the original monster created to emit those mana waves was born."

"I see. So is he still there at...um...the place on this map?" asked 2V.

The man in the lab coat tilted his head.

"Most likely. All I can say for sure is the original was born there. There might be more in the files at the temple of Megis."

"Hm. This just got a lot more interesting."

"Do you see a lot of profit in this? That's what you're ultimately after, right?"

"No, no. This looks a bit more interesting than that. At any rate, just wait a bit longer. I think I'll be able to get some interesting results."

2V grinned.

Chapter 1: A Surprising Health Examination

Akuto had no good memories when it came to health examinations.

This was of course due to being labeled a future demon king during the examination upon entering the school.

"Having a surprise health examination is odd," said Hiroshi as they stood lined up in the infirmary while wearing only their underwear.

"It does make you wonder," replied Akuto.

For some reason, a health examination had been suddenly announced that morning. The students had been confused but still underwent the examination. The boys were going first and about half of the line had finished already.

"They're taking blood?"

The student in front of Akuto held his right arm out toward the doctor. A syringe took about half a test tube of blood.

"Aniki, do you not like needles?" asked Hiroshi with a grin.

"Well, they hurt," replied Akuto seriously.

Hiroshi had not expected that answer, so he could only stare blankly

back.

"Aniki, I thought you were the type to charge directly into high-temperature plasma and to rip off your own arm."

"If it hurts, it hurts."

"Ehh?"

As they spoke, Akuto's turn came. The needle pierced his outstretched arm and he grimaced in pain.

"D-did it hurt?" asked Hiroshi.

"It hurt," answered Akuto plainly.

Their conversation was on the level of elementary school students, but the boys' examination ended without issue.

"I'm glad nothing happened. There has been so much going on lately that I thought someone had to be plotting something when I heard about a sudden health examination."

Akuto spoke with Hiroshi as he put on his clothes and went outside to wait for the girls to finish their examination.

"It's true that something more could be going on when you're involved,

aniki. In fact, it feels somehow lacking when nothing happens.”

“I hate that I can’t deny that.”

Akuto’s shoulders drooped.

And then Akuto spotted some suspicious figures behind the school building. He glanced toward Hiroshi and the other boy nodded in understanding.

“Looks like something really is happening.”

“Don’t joke. But we can’t just ignore it.”

The figures were moving along while trying to remain hidden. They moved from the thicket behind the building and hid behind a pillar of the building. It seemed to be a group of two.

Akuto and Hiroshi began moving while making sure the pair could not see them.

The pair seemed to be using a camouflage cloak to hide themselves. The cloak could not completely hide them, but it would detect the surrounding colors and transform to similar colors.

“I’ll circle around. Aniki, you blow them up after I scare them your way,” whispered Hiroshi.

"I'm not so sure about 'blowing them up', but I do think we need to keep them from running away and ask them what they're doing here. We can use your plan for that," agreed Akuto.

Hiroshi made a wide circle around the thicket to reach the opposite side. He nodded so Akuto could see, waited for the perfect timing, and used magic to create the sound of a siren.

"Waaah!"

The pair wearing a camouflage cloak shouted in surprise and began to run away from Hiroshi. The colors of the school building being displayed on the cloak shifted and their position grew vaguely visible.

They tried to flee but found Akuto standing before them.

"Wait. Don't run. Who are you?"

The pair panicked when Akuto appeared before them and spoke. They completely lost control of themselves.

"W-waaah! It's him!" they shouted and fired magical light bullets at Akuto without warning.

"Dammit!"

Akuto reflexively raised a hand. It was nothing more than a bad habit of his, but he was bad at controlling his power. Also, he was the type to

negate an attack with a more powerful one rather than to defend against it.

And as a result...

A brilliant light and an explosive noise filled the surrounding area. Akuto's magic light bullet blew away the one fired by the pair and continued on toward the pair without slowing.

—Oh, no!

So as not to hurt the pair, Akuto immediately caused the power forming the light bullet to scatter.

The pair covered their face. A ring of energy surrounding them shot to the side.

That ring of energy struck the wall of the school building.

The pair stood frozen while covering their faces. Once they realized they felt no pain, they checked and were relieved to find they were not hurt.

Akuto was relieved as well. He had managed to avoid injuring them.

"I did not intend to surprise you like that. But I saw you using that camouflage cloak and wondered-..."

Akuto trailed off as he heard an odd rumbling noise.

—Eh? What?

His question was quickly answered.

The wall of the school building was collapsing toward the pair. The ring of energy had left a clean crack where it had struck. This had cut out a circular portion of the wall.

“Waaah!”

The pair jumped out of the way.

The wall fell and produced a low, heavy noise. The pair and Akuto were both at a loss for words, but the situation did not end there.

Many naked girls appeared before Akuto’s eyes.

Technically, they had not appeared. He had merely blown a hole in the wall to the girls’ health inspection room, but it took Akuto a fair bit of time to realize that. And it also took the naked girls a while to grasp what had happened. For a full five seconds, they stood still, not covering themselves and leaving every inch of their nude bodies exposed.

“Oh... So it was to peek on the girls.”

Akuto finally realized what the pair had been trying to do. However, that was not what he should have been saying.

"Kyaaaaaaaaah! Noooooo!"

Several screams filled the air around him and many different objects were thrown at him. He tried to apologize while blocking those objects with his hands, but he was cut off by an even louder voice.

"Sai Akuto! You act so shamelessly each and every time!"

A girl quickly threw on the outer layer of her uniform to cover her nudity and pointed a wooden sword toward Akuto. She was Hattori Junko.

"No, there is a good reason for this..."

"What good reason is there to peek so boldly that you destroy the wall!?"

"Listen to me. I was not trying to peek."

"You just said 'it was to peek on the girls'! You had clearly just recalled your original goal after growing so excited you destroyed the wall and lost sight of that goal!"

"No, I wasn't the one trying to peek."

Akuto glanced around to ask the pair to explain the situation, but they had run off. Hiroshi was also nowhere to be found.

"Huh? They're gone..."

"Do not try to play dumb!"

"I'm not. They really were here."

"Stop trying to argue!"

Junko swung her wooden sword. Akuto was unable to avoid it. The magic power filling the sword caused an explosion that blasted Akuto high into the sky.

"I thought taking the blood first would have made some people suspicious," said Yoshie as she walked through the schoolyard while dressed like a nurse.

A doctor in a white coat walked alongside her. That generic-faced doctor was one of 2V's dolls. He was grinning while lightly tapping the trunk in his hand.

"We just need to escape now, so it shouldn't be a problem. We have what we came for."

"Yes, Soga Keena's blood," muttered Yoshie.

"Who would think they would have a health examination at such a convenient time. This went quite well. Now, I will take this back with me and send you the sample later," said 2V.

Yoshie nodded, but suddenly looked behind her. She had heard an explosion.

"Did something happen?"

Yoshie was worried, but 2V shook his head.

"Stop. You must not worry about anything other than your objective at times like this. Then again, you only came along to see Soga Keena for yourself. You were mostly just a spectator in the first place." 2V thought for a moment longer and then nodded. "I will leave now, but you do as you wish. Just don't tell anyone what you were here for if they ask."

Yoshie nodded and walked toward the explosion she had heard.

Yoshie could be very curious. That had supported her intelligence. What she finally found behind the school building was something that satisfied her curiosity quite well.

A tall boy lay collapsed in a thicket with smoke rising from his body.

"What happened to cause this?" asked Yoshie as she looked down at Akuto.

Akuto looked up at her.

"It would only make this more complicated if I explained it. At any rate, I'm not hurt."

Akuto stood up. He had several small injuries and a perfect trail of blood flowed down his forehead.

"Looking like that, I can only think you are trying to act tough when you say you aren't hurt."

Yoshie's comment was completely right, but Akuto shook his head.

"I know why you would think that, but my body is tougher than most people's."

"Really?"

Yoshie tore off a piece of her white coat and used a hand motion to tell Akuto to crouch down.

"You didn't have to tear your clothes..."

Akuto was confused, but Yoshie nodded as if it were nothing.

"This coat is nothing more than a tool. Also, it isn't mine. So don't worry

about it.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

Akuto crouched down and looked at Yoshie’s face more closely.

He had not noticed at first glance, but she had a well-featured face. He had not noticed because each individual part was not too noticeable on its own. It was a plain face, but one noticed its good points as one stared at it.

She wore goggles over her minimally groomed hair. Mana screens could be made anywhere, so not many people went out of their way to use projection devices like that. That seemed to say something about her personality. Her way of doing things was to use that device which had been customized to hold the exact functions she needed. This made her look something like a literary girl.



Yoshie placed the torn portion of her coat on Akuto's cheek and wiped up the blood and dirt. She then brought her face in close to his.

"Ah..."

Akuto pulled his head back.

"Could you stay still? I can't see."

Yoshie seemed to be filled with curiosity as she held Akuto's head in place with her hands. She was close enough for him to feel her breath on his face, but she did not seem to mind as she continued observing his face up close.

"Wh-what are you doing...?" asked Akuto with a blush.

"Fwohhh!" cried Yoshie. "Ohhh! Your wounds are healing!"

Yoshie ran a finger across Akuto's cheek. She traced that finger along a wound that was disappearing before her eyes.

"Amazing. Do you have an item equipped that gives you regen? At any rate, this is amazing. So were you born with this?"

"It seems I was. As I said, my body is tougher than most people's."

"Amazing. This is fascinating."

Yoshie's eyes sparkled as she stared at Akuto's face.

"Could you stop that? You're making me blush. Also, what is regen?"

"Ohhh, sorry. I just got a bit excited. Now I'm embarrassed. Regen is a term used in games to refer to health regeneration. Do you play video games?"

Yoshie moved away and smiled at Akuto.

"No, I never have. I've always been too busy. Are they fun?" asked Akuto.

Yoshie gave a large nod.

"Of course! They aren't all that popular these days, though. I think games are a type of culture. There's even an old saying that says 'no more than 24 hours of gaming a day'."

"What does that mean?"

"No matter how much you try, you can unfortunately only play video games for 24 hours in a day. Basically, it means they're so fun you want to play more."

"I see. Maybe I should try it sometime."

"You should. You definitely should," declared Yoshie strongly.

"Thanks for the advice," said Akuto with a nod.

When Yoshie saw that, she gave a deeply emotional nod in return.

"You're the first person who has appreciated what I said. Normally, people are driven away."

"Driven away?"

"Well, boys will try to talk to me sometimes, you know? And when we start talking, I begin talking about video games, right? When I do, they gradually move away. They literally do start moving away from me. And the worst ones say they didn't think I was this kind of girl when they saw me."

Yoshie emphasized her embarrassing experiences with odd enthusiasm. It sounded like she was bragging about how awkward she was, so most people who had made it this far into the conversation would have started to move away as well.

But Akuto gave a forceful nod.

"I know what you mean. It was the same for me at my jobs and in middle school. The girls would try to talk to me, but after a while they would say they didn't think I was this kind of guy."

"Fwohh! Wow! You're the first person to ever understand me! Hey, hey. What's your name?"

Yoshie leaned forward.

"Sai Akuto," replied Akuto.

Yoshie grabbed his hand.

"Kita Yoshie! This is great. We should play an online game together sometime."

"Fine, but when?"

"How about for an entire week starting tomorrow? I can do it while I work, so that's no problem."

Yoshie's request was absolutely ridiculous, but it was normal for her. She always had a game running on one corner of her screen.

But on this point alone, Akuto was a normal person.

"No, that would be difficult for me. I have classes and my everyday life. By the way, does that white coat mean you're a nurse? Surely that job keeps you busy."

That reminded Yoshie of why she had come. She could not say they had needed a sample of Soga Keena's blood to cause a change in the virtual alternate dimension. That alone was illegal because they had not gotten her permission. However, Yoshie decided telling the truth was better than lying when it came to her own profession.

"I guess you could say I'm only temporarily helping out as a nurse. I

normally work in the temple of Megis.”

Akuto looked back at Yoshie with an impressed look.

“Excuse me, but you are about the same age as me, aren’t you?”

“I went to university overseas. Unfortunately, that means I am not qualified to work as a priest, but going back to school would be too much of a pain.”

“You must be smart.”

Akuto’s eyes opened wide in admiration.

Yoshie smiled awkwardly.

“Stop that. People who find school to be a pain aren’t considered smart in this country. Actually, I suppose they aren’t overseas either. No matter where I go, the desire to only do the things I enjoy isn’t welcomed.”

“The things you enjoy? Like video games?”

“There is that, but I generally dislike troublesome things. I dislike sweaty things and people with a lot of motivation,” said Yoshie while scratching at her head.

“I kind of understand what you mean. People get so obsessed with

things that have no real meaning and they waste so much money," said Akuto.

Yoshie's eyes began to sparkle even more.

"You're just getting more and more perfect! That's right. I can't stand that kind of meaningless friendship. If there's a reason for it, fine, but I just can't understand the types that want to commit crimes or get into fights."

"Come to think of it, in a world where we have most everything we need, attempts to hurt other people are attempts to see others' reactions and get to know them better. I understand what you mean."

Akuto nodded in understanding.

Yoshie's words grew even more rapid.

"You really do understand! That's why I can't just chat with people no matter how curious I am. We meet each other, greet each other, and then...what else is there? I wouldn't mind if we could talk about politics or something, but most people seeking that kind of friendship are so ignorant."

"I know what you mean. In other words..."

Yoshie and Akuto's passionate conversation continued. This was the first time Yoshie had experienced this and the same could be said for Akuto. As they held that conversation which was oddly out of sync with the rest

of the world, they looked like scientists with no laboratory. However, the slight flush to their faces also made them look like lovers continually talking at the fork in their paths home because they did not want to part.

The two of them seemed to lose track of time. When the bell finally rang, they looked around in sudden realization, exchanged a glance, and smiled at each other.

“Well, that was fun. I’ll contact you again sometime. And that isn’t just a social nicety; I mean it.”

“Thanks. It was fun for me too. Anyway, I have to get to class.”

Yoshie and Akuto shook hands.

They began walking in their respective directions and realized a while later that they had not exchanged contact information.

—Well, I guess it isn’t a problem. I get the feeling I’ll meet him again soon. After all, I’ve never met someone so interesting. There has to be something here.

As Yoshie thought to herself, she nodded in self-satisfaction.

<President, the pursuit is going well, arinsu.>

An oddly accented voice arrived via telepathy.

This was Constant Magic Academy's student council room. Naturally, it was the student council president who was receiving the telepathic communication.

A short girl in a stylish hat – Lily Shiraishi – nodded in front of a mana screen.

"Don't let your guard down. This is a doll you're following. We have no way of knowing how he'll try to escape."

<I have sent out a great number of bats to act as my eyes. I can make no guarantees, though.>

"If you lose him, I'll kill you," said Lily concisely but with great seriousness.

<Please give me a break, arinsu...>

Lily had been speaking with Ootake Michie, the vice president. The girl displayed on the mana screen seemed to be in a city park. She was slender and pale, so she was reminiscent of a vampire. She could freely control magical machines modeled after bats.

Michie was tracking 2V on the president's orders. No one would take notice of the bats in the city as the sun set, so they were perfect for tracking someone.

"I doubt we'll find 2V's headquarters, but we need to at least catch the very end of his tail," said Lily enthusiastically.

She had only recently learned of this plan. Lily's father was a priest of Megis, so he had been able to obtain information on the plan 2V had Yoshie working on. 2V planned on using the virtual alternate dimension expanded around the temple of Megis, so cooperation from the temple had been necessary. Also, this plan was backed by the radicals who wished to eliminate the demon king. 2V may have specialized in covert operations, but he had been forced to bring information to the surface this time.

Lily had learned the plan involved obtaining Keena's cells and using the mana waves they produced to seal Akuto in the virtual alternate dimension. She had hurriedly held a health examination and laid the trap. As planned, 2V had arrived to obtain Keena's blood. Lily had not known what 2V would look like, but she had only needed to pursue the person who carried out Keena's blood.

So far, 2V had fallen for the trap splendidly.

<President, he entered a building,> reported Michie.

"Can you follow him inside?"

<I will try. Let's see. The building is the scientific research building of Imperial University, arinsu.>

"Figure out what lab he entered by any means necessary!"

<By any means necessary? Well, I will do my best, arinsu...>

After saying she would try for a bit longer, Michie ended the telepathic connection.

"Now then. How is the girl doing?" muttered Lily.

She made a new telepathic connection. A girl with a wild face appeared on the mana screen.

<Oh, president. The girl talked with Sai Akuto for a bit, but I found her home without much difficulty, gya.>

This girl was named Kamiyama Kanna. She was one of the three student council officers and she could transform into a wolf. She was currently using that sense of smell to tail Yoshie.

"That's nice, but we are not working for some underground business. As long as we know her identity, finding her residence is easy. What I want to know is if she did anything suspicious. What did she discuss with Sai Akuto? Was she trying to gain information on him?"

<Didn't look like it, gya. It seems this really was the first she'd heard of him, gya.>

"So their meeting was a complete coincidence?"

<Looks that way, gya.>

"Well, he does stand out. And I suppose no one would take the risk of contacting their target ahead of time. Let's assume it's another case of his terrible luck with women. I just wish that would stop causing so much trouble. Not that it matters to me if he dies. This is about my own personal revenge," muttered Lily as the look in her eyes grew harsh.

<Is just having the data enough?> asked 2V.

"It should be. No two people have the same mana waves. I can set the values for the machine remotely. Being able to handle most things without meeting face to face is only logical, right?" said Yoshie.

She was calling from her home to the laboratory to which 2V had brought Keena's blood sample. The device meant to transfer things to the virtual alternate dimension had been left in the laboratory, but Yoshie was the one adjusting its settings.

"This is similar to using magic through Keena. You could say Keena's inherent magic allows her to freely alter the virtual alternate dimension."

Joy could be heard in Yoshie's voice. 2V noticed it and asked a question.

<Do you mind if I ask why you are so fixated on altering the virtual alternate dimension?>

"If we can change the world as we see fit, I was thinking people could simply live there. They could live in comfort. Research needs to be done into how to supply nutrients or energy, but the odds of finding a way to do that automatically are pretty good."

As she spoke, Yoshie's fingers raced busily across the several mana screens displayed on her desk.

Whenever she had a small break in rewriting the program, she would pick up and take a sip of the drink on the desk. A towel to wipe away sweat and the maintenance kit for her goggles were also within arm's reach. She continued her work with the practiced movements of someone used to working on their own.

"In other words, if people have a space in which they can live according to the contents of their mind, they can live with no need for friendship. I think that might be a truly human way to live."

Yoshie was supposedly speaking to 2V, but she began speaking to herself as she continued.

"I really am grateful for this experiment. Everyone was focused on my research, but almost everyone ignored my ideas behind the research. They would call it creepy or unhealthy. If anything is possible in the virtual alternate dimension, you can live like you're in a video game. I was thinking of giving the virtual alternate dimension certain rules when it was changed. That way anyone who entered would become data in the game. They would be data that can rewrite its own data. In other words, they could use their own will to achieve more growth than a physical body is capable of. Once everyone becomes a video game character and tries it out, I'm sure they'll finally understand what I'm trying to say."

Yoshie increased her programming speed.

<How very interesting.>



Those words were accompanied by a secret smile from 2V.

And that smile was on 2V's real body. She was watching several mana screens while lying in a room filled with no furnishings other than many dolls. 2V lived secretly in that apartment that not even her fellow Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office members knew about.

2V thought her and Yoshie's environment may have been similar. 2V's true form was that of a preteen girl. And she lived with her great ability not recognized by any authority.

—But it is possible to realize the things in your mind here in the real world. You are called unhealthy because you do not realize that.

Those two girls thought differently in that way. And the biggest difference was in their ultimate goal.

—If we are to gain control of the virtual alternate dimension, creating a paradise would be too boring. The only way to live a full life is to rule over the real world as a formless king in a godless world.

2V was planning to betray Yoshie. The plan she had told Yoshie about was a lie.

—And the pleasure of betrayal is most stimulating when done in the real world.

2V grinned and traced her sickly thin fingers across her pale face.

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Video Game World

"A-chan. Fantasy is great, isn't it?"

This sudden comment came from Keena.

There was no context for it. After all, it had come early in the morning in Akuto's dorm room. Keena had snuck in at some point and was scooping white rice into her mouth with a wooden spoon.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Akuto sat up in his bed and replied to her comment. He showed no confusion over the odd situation of this red-haired girl entering his room and eating rice. He was used to her doing that.

"Fantasy, A-chan. Like swords and magic," she declared while munching on the rice.

"Isn't that what we do all the time?" asked Akuto in confusion.

However, Keena held up her spoon and waved it back and forth.

"Tsk, ts, ts. That's not it at all, A-chan. Fantasy is about heroes who come from another world and captured princesses."

"Yeah, I suppose you won't find those in real life," said Akuto while feeling that something was off about that statement.

A voice denying what he said came from above.

"You two do not seem to realize how special you are."

Korone, an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam, jumped down from a shelf near the ceiling. She lived with Akuto because the government had ordered her to observe him, but she seemed to be leaving Akuto recently.

"I suppose there is that. Anyway, have you been reading some old book again?" asked Akuto.

Keena shook her head.

"No. I found a fun video game."

—I sure am hearing about video games a lot recently. Come to think of it, I never got that girl's contact information. Maybe I'll find her if I start playing some video games.

"What kind of game is it? I'm interested, but I've never played any."

"This is the one I've been playing."

Keena displayed the game on a mana screen. It seemed to have been created by someone named Yoshihiko.

"See? It's as fun as rice," said Keena as she played it a bit.

Video games in his era used holographic video, but the story and gameplay had not changed much from long ago. The aspects humans found enjoyable did not change very much.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean when you say it's as fun as rice. Do you mean it gets more fun the more you chew on it?"

"C'mon. Rice is fun."

"...O-okay. Anyway, what kind of game is it?"

Akuto peered at the mana screen. It was an online RPG in which one had an adventure in a fantasy world, but its special feature was the ability to wage war by commanding troops. One could prepare many soldiers besides the player character and the size of that army would grow as one gained levels.

"It looks like a war game."

"Yeah, but you don't have to be a commander. You can be a kidnapped princess. Then you just have to be kidnapped and an army will come save you."

"Saying you 'just' have to be kidnapped is kind of amazing, but I guess it is a game... Hm? Does that mean a war begins because you were

kidnapped?"

"Yeah."

"So that's what's fun about that."

Akuto somehow understood.

"I am amazed you came over in the morning to talk about video games," said Korone.

Keena clapped her hands as she remembered something.

"Oh, right! The thing is, the student council president said she would be leaving early this morning, so she wanted A-chan to go and do her job."

"Doesn't she have the three officers for that?"

"They'll be going, too. In fact, she was borrowing Hiroshi-kun too. It seems they were called in last night."

"If that's the case, I have no choice. I wonder what happened."

Akuto stood up and prepared to ask her to leave so he could change, but he suddenly realized something.

"But why were you the one to come tell me that?"

"I was up all night playing games. I happened across the president when she was about to leave."

"...I see. Don't you need to get some sleep?"

"I'm fine. As long as I eat rice, I can go for a while without sleep. And if I get tired, I can just skip class."

"You live as free a life as always."

Akuto had Keena leave and removed his pajama top.

And then someone spoke from behind him.

"I did not think you would try to sexually seduce me like this."

"Wah!"

He turned around to find Korone standing directly behind him.

"C-come to think of it, I forgot to ask you to leave."

"You find it natural for us to be together. You could say we have the same relationship as a husband and wife."

"Don't be ridiculous... Anyway, you always leave on your own when I change."

"Yes, but something caught my attention about what you were discussing."

It was rare for Korone to say something like this. She usually did not interfere outside of teasing him. Akuto's expression grew serious.

"Something caught your attention?"

"Yes. I am in a bit of a dilemma given my official position, so I will put it bluntly: you are being targeted by a certain plan. However, I have been forbidden to reveal the contents of or stop that plan."

"That...sounds bad."

Akuto understood the gravity of the situation. Korone was a L'Isle-Adam and she acted on the orders of the government. Inside the government were a radical group that wished to eliminate Akuto as quickly as possible and a moderate group that generally wished to protect him. She had to receive conflicting orders on a lot of the details.

"Yes. So please be careful. I will do everything I can."

"Thanks. This must be what the president is dealing with."

Akuto almost removed his pajama pants, but realized Korone was

staring at him.

"I almost took my pants off without thinking. Could you leave for a moment?"

"No. I cannot leave your side for an instant," said Korone with a serious expression.

But Akuto had known her long enough to understand this was a joke.

"Could you please stop with those jokes?"

Meanwhile, Lily hid on the road near Imperial University's scientific research building. She held anpan and milk while she staked out the place like a police detective. She was observing the room Michie had located the day before.

The light was on in that room. In the dimness of early morning, only that window had light coming from it.

"I want to begin my attack while no one else is here," muttered Lily.

"Eh? You've gotten permission, right? You can't just go in and attack the place..."

This question came from Hiroshi who had been dragged along against his will. He stood next to Lily while nibbling at a breakfast of a cream-

filled bread, but his eyes opened in surprise.

"If I had permission, I wouldn't be hiding and staking out the place. I'd have charged in right away. The three officers are investigating the surrounding area. Once they've confirmed the situation, I'm going in."

"G-going in?"

"I'll force our way in and beat the crap out of whoever's inside. What else would I mean?"

Hiroshi could not help but panic.

"Wait! Then why did you bring me along!?"

"Oh. I guess I never mentioned that." Lily nodded with a look of realization. "I've learned that Yamato Bouichirou's subordinates are putting together a certain plan."

"Eh? Yamato Bouichirou's...?"

Hiroshi was at a loss for words.

It had gone through various twists and turns, but Yamato Bouichirou had been the one to give Hiroshi the anti-demon king combat suit he had used.

"That's why I called you. You may not be much help in a fight, but you might know something or they might be in a special position as far as they are concerned."

"Eh? But I don't know anything about this."

"I know that. I just mean you might remember something given the chance. And if you happen to be an important existence to them, I can use you as a hostage."

Hiroshi paled because Lily's voice did not contain even a hint of joking.

"W-wait. You're...joking, right?"

"Of course not. I'm willing to make a few sacrifices if I can kill 2V."

Lily's eyes had completely glazed over in anger.

"W-wait. Isn't this just a personal grudge? ...A-anyway, what is this plan? Didn't you come here to stop it?"

"What's wrong with a personal grudge? And I'm not thinking about stopping that plan."

"Eh?"

"The plan is to seal Sai Akuto in the virtual alternate dimension. Most

likely, he will either be left there with no influence on the outside world or they will kill him inside."

"A-and you aren't going to stop them?"

"Why should I care? That's his personal problem. As long as the majority of the students are safe, it's not my problem."

As Lily made that announcement, she received a telepathic communication. It came from the three officers.

<President, I have control of the back, arinsu. No one can get out now.>

"Good. I'll tell you when I'm going to go in," replied Lily as she tossed aside her anpan and milk.

She grabbed Hiroshi's hand and started walking.

"W-wait, president. I'm not ready..."

"I'm not waiting around. If we don't go now, people will start to arrive."

Lily pulled on Hiroshi's hand and entered the grounds.

Imperial University was opened to the public. Outsiders often visited the individual laboratories. For that reason, Lily easily arrived at the door to their destination.

At the very least, there had been no resistance or traps so far. Lily was still cautious and she glanced at Hiroshi as she reached for the doorknob.

Hiroshi assumed she wanted something from him, but he was shocked when she kicked down the door without waiting for a response.

“Wh-what are you doing, president!?”

But Lily did not respond. After kicking down the door, she immediately entered the room. She did not enter the way one normally entered a university laboratory. She looked like special forces entering a terrorist hideout or a yakuza attacking a rival group.

Lily rolled inside while keeping her stance low. She held her arms forward while glancing around the room. She specialized in a spell that freely extended her arms, so she could fire her fists like handgun bullets. If she caught sight of someone, she would blow them away in the next instant. But that was only if she had a target.

“What!?”

Lily's expression stiffened at this unexpected turn of events.

Despite the lights being on, no one was inside.

There was nowhere to hide in the room. Shelves of documents and experimental equipment cluttered up the laboratory, but the space felt

cramped even with one person standing inside.

"Did he get away? It couldn't be."

Lily telepathically checked with the three officers. They replied with puzzled voices.

<What? Nothing has happened, arinsu.>

<Uga.>

<Kita Yoshie hasn't done anything either, gya.>

"Check closer! They might be tricking you!"

The instant Lily barked that order, a single ray of light glittered on a desk in the laboratory.

Lily took a defensive stance, but it was the light of a mana screen. It showed a man with a forgettable face. In other words, it was 2V.

"Damn you!" roared Lily, but it seemed the footage was not a transmission.

A preset message began to play.

<Oh, well done, well done, little girl. Unfortunately, I was aware of a

great many things, so I took the initiative. We have already begun, so you were a bit late. I look forward to the next time we meet. Oh, but I guess there won't be a next time. Did you know there is a way to rig a room to be automatically annihilated?>

Before 2V finished speaking, Lily leaped backwards. She reached out and grabbed ahold of Hiroshi who was standing still in surprise and she rolled out of the room.

<I thought it would be fun to try it, but it would have caused too much trouble. Thanks for all your hard work.>

2V's mocking voice reverberated throughout the room.

"G-goddamn you!" shouted Lily as she began lightly beating Hiroshi on the head as she held him in her arms.

"Eeee! Stop! President! Please calm down!"

"Are you sure this method is okay? Isn't it a bit odd?" asked Yoshie.

"Don't worry. Everything is going well," replied 2V.

Yoshie and 2V had immediately begun implementing their plan once the preparations were complete. The device to control the virtual alternate dimension had been programmed and they had magically transferred themselves close to the school.

Yoshie's ability to complete the programming faster than Lily had expected and 2V's usage of a magical transfer to escape had won out in the end. Magical transfers cost quite a lot, so they were not used unless one had a very good reason.

"They misjudged how seriously we were taking this. Even if we are sneaking around, this is still a government project."

"I suppose I should be grateful I can have my research backed by something like that. Anyway, why did we have to come to the school? Isn't this an experiment to control the virtual alternate dimension?"

"Ha ha. Come to think of it, I never explained that part to you."

2V laughed and pointed across Constant Magic Academy's schoolyard. The morning assembly was being held there. Yoshie and 2V stood where 2V's tent had been located during the large-scale battle recently held here.

"We will seal him inside."

2V pointed at the boy standing atop the podium rather than on the grass. When Yoshie saw him, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Him? But I just spoke with him recently."

"You spoke with him? Do you not know who he is? He is the demon

king," said 2V carelessly.

"Fwohhh! That's a surprise. I didn't know that. Hm? We're going to seal him inside?"

Yoshie's eyebrows moved up.

"Yes. If he is sealed within the virtual alternate dimension, he will have the same level of power as a normal human. A lot of people want to kill him without causing any damage to those around him."

2V grinned.

"K-kill him?"

Yoshie was clearly confused, so 2V suppressed laughter and continued speaking.

"Exactly. That is the government's project. I apologize for deceiving you, but you do not need to worry about this. You will not be considered a criminal for doing this. And taking part in a killing is something everyone should try at least once."

Yoshie was so shocked she covered her face with her hands.

"I-I don't understand how you can think like that. Hey, can't you rethink this?"

"No. I'm not trying to threaten you, but you'll be wanted by the knights if you don't do this. Ha ha ha. What is there to think about? Not doing it is a crime and doing it isn't. You don't have a choice in the matter."

2V could not help but laugh.

Yoshie bit her lip.

—What can I do? Wait, there might still be something I can do. I might be able to turn everything around. I need to stay calm. Stay calm...

"O-okay. I don't like it, but I have no choice. I just have to set up this device, right?"

"Exactly. Thank you for your cooperation."

2V gave a triumphant laugh.

"I have to seal him as a normal human. Those are my orders, right?"

"Yes. Don't even think about doing something else instead."

"There's nothing I could do. I have no choice. I understand that."

Yoshie leaned over the virtual alternate dimension control device.

The device was a cube with 50 cm sides and it had a keyboard and

monitor embedded on one side. Yoshie used them to operate it.

"What does it feel like to help kill someone you talked to, even if just once?" asked 2V cruelly.

Yoshie could not help let the disgust appear on her face, but she responded calmly.

"It's painful because there were things I could sympathize with him about. I just hope he will understand to a certain extent."

"Hmm. I see. I don't know what it is you want him to understand, though. Is it something you need him to think? Well, it doesn't matter. It's best to put your all into your work even if you have to ignore your feelings."

"I agree with that. But in the end, people are made to only do what they want to do. I only spoke with him for a bit, but I get the feeling we have an understanding of each other. And so I somehow understand what he wants to do. In other words, I get the feeling he will be able to overcome this as long as he is given a chance."

"A chance? What are you talking about?"

"Heh heh. This is what I'm talking about."

After her extremely calm yet passionate announcement, Yoshie activated the device without waiting for 2V's instruction.

"Wh-what did you do!?"

For once, 2V panicked. Even a strategist on 2V's level could not tell what she was thinking.

"What did I do? I activated the device. This will transfer the surrounding people and objects into the virtual alternate dimension. Just to be clear, I made sure to do everything you told me to do," said Yoshie.

A low rumbling could be heard as the virtual alternate dimension control device activated.

"The surrounding people and objects!?"

Surprised by those unexpected words, 2V stretched out a hand to grab Yoshie.

"It's too late," muttered Yoshie.

2V was unable to grab ahold of Yoshie. 2V's vision was already distorting. Space itself was glowing and sinking downwards.

"This academy, I, and the control device itself are being transferred to the virtual alternate dimension expanded around the god Megis."

"The device itself!? You fool! You have no idea what will happen!"

“True, the device is meant to be left outside. But if I don’t bring it inside, you could use it. Also, I added in an element you hadn’t thought of. To give myself an advantage on the other side, I used the video game I programmed as the world control program. This will allow him to do something. That is what I believe.”

Yoshie was calm. As she held the device in her arms, she too sank “down”.

“Tch! You thought of all that in just an instant!? But I will be going with you.”

2V used his left hand to grab his extended right arm at the elbow. And he pulled that right arm off at the elbow. This was only possible because he was a doll.

And 2V threw that right arm toward the device. Yoshie noticed and covered the device with her hands, but that right hand grabbed tightly onto her hand.

“I will be sending just my arm there!” shouted 2V.

And the surrounding world splendidly “sank to the other side”.

A bit before the device was activated, Akuto stood on the podium while trying to figure out what to say.

Today, a morning assembly was being held in front of the entire student body. With the student council president and three officers gone, Akuto had been appointed to take their place. He had no choice but to take care of the morning assembly.

At Constant Magic Academy, the headmaster almost never gave a greeting. Instead, the student council president would give advice concerning the students' lives and tell them what the student council's policies were. Akuto had to do that now.

"This week's motto is 'work to make the school more beautiful', but you must not think of this as nothing more than cleaning."

After announcing that he was acting in place of the president, Akuto gave that declaration, but he realized he should not have done so. He was not explaining the policy. Instead, he was giving his interpretation of the ideology behind it and hoping to begin a discussion from there. As he continued speaking, his argument seemed to travel in an odd direction. He began to struggle to find the right words.

"Filth collects in complicated spaces one rarely touches. It is the same as dust collecting in the spaces between tangled wires. To clean that, one must untangle the wires and unplug everything. In other words, true cleaning cannot be accomplished without breaking everything down and building it back up. Making the school a more beautiful place means to remove the mental sediment that has built up in each and every one of you. And that sediment builds up in the complicated spaces one rarely touches. The wires from before are a metaphor for this process. In other words, it is important that we all break down our mental systems that have become set in stone."

Despite being the one speaking, Akuto found himself unable to control the odd direction in which his speech was headed. The students began muttering to each other at his extreme ideas.

"Is he telling us to doubt our common sense?"

"No, he mentioned our mental systems, so he must be telling us to try going completely nuts."

"I see. A speech from the demon king really is something else."

—No. That isn't what I meant...

Akuto was troubled.

"Now what is this mental system? It is related to how humans comprehend their surroundings. To lessen the mental burden, people simplify their comprehension of things. Even attending this school is the result of this simplified comprehension. Learning and going to school are not actually identical concepts. That is what I mean by a system. You must not forget that those comprehensions that you have set in stone are connected to the system of society."

An even greater stir ran through the students.

"He isn't telling us to go nuts. He's telling us to actively destroy the system of society!"

"This is anarchism! And at the morning assembly!"

"And from a substitute speaker!"

—Huh?

Akuto thought deeply about what he should say next.

"No. I am merely saying this beautification process should be turned towards our set ideas as well. Those will eventually leave us inert. If we are aware we carry society on our shoulders, we must actively keep up the difficult fight for a new era."

"Wow. He's turning the morning assembly into a political rally!"

"A fight for a new era? That sounds like something an agitator would say!"

"I was keeping quiet because you were a substitute! But I won't let you have your way!"

It did not look like the commotion among the students was going to die down. Angry shouts washed over Akuto.

—Not good. I need to calm them down...

“Silence! No matter how much of a commotion you cause, it will not affect the legitimacy of my words! I have said nothing to be ashamed of! No matter who speaks the words, you should listen to them as an explanation of their path! And if you will not listen, it means this academy has left the proper path! If that is the case, you will soon come to regret... it...”

By the time Akuto realized how arrogantly he was speaking, he was almost finished. His tone gradually fell toward the end, but the students did not notice that timidity. This was because the entire academy began “sinking” partway through.

“Wha-...!?”

“Kyaaaah! What is this!?”

“Is it the demon king’s power!?”

“E-eeee! Are we descending into hell?”

Screams filled the schoolyard. However, the entire academy – screams included – continued to sink into space itself.

—This sensation!

Akuto recognized it. This was the same sensation from when he had entered a book.

—So does that mean...

Akuto suspected Keena for an instant, but when he spotted her among the students, she was standing next to Korone and looking shocked.

—Wh-what? Then what is happening here!?

Junko was also able to recognize what was happening.

"This is the inside of the virtual alternate dimension, isn't it?" asked Junko when she found Etou Fujiko.

"Yes, I am sure of it. Even if I did not enter into that one before."

Fujiko soothed the female students who approached her. She had a much more demonic personality than Akuto and practiced black magic, but the students had yet to discover who she truly was. The female students even referred to her as "onee-sama".

When the crying girls heard what Fujiko had said, they looked up at her.

"Onee-sama, you know what this is?"

"Yes. This is most likely the virtual alternate dimension used for magical transfers. I witnessed a similar phenomenon once."

Fujiko glanced around.

Constant Magic Academy was within a forest. Its grounds had always contained a large expanse of nature, but the forest was much thicker now. It felt as if a jungle was approaching. And the scenery was blatantly different from usual. The flora was obviously not the type seen in the island nation making up the empire.

"It seems the entire academy was transferred over."

Fujiko looked toward Junko and Junko nodded.

"But senpai, the school building..."

Junko pointed toward the school building.

It was definitely the school building, but its appearance had somehow changed. One of the students in the schoolyard realized what the difference was.

"A fortress... It's a fortress! This is what it looked like back when it was a fortress!"

The school building had almost no windows. The few it did have were high up and the narrow type used as an arrowslit. The smooth walls prevented entry and the main entrance was shut with a thick gate.

"I had heard the school building was a fortress during the first demon

king war," said Junko and a stir ran through the surrounding students.

"Then have we gone back in time?"

Junko denied that possibility.

"No. If so, the fortress would not be abandoned. We have not travelled to a different era. Instead, we should assume this world has been modified by certain rules. That is how the virtual alternate dimension works."

"This world has been modified by certain rules?" asked a female student.

Fujiko nodded.

"Yes. In other words, we can assume this is the world within a story or within a video game!" she said based on her past experience.

A sudden voice then responded to her.

"Exactly. I shall explain the rest. Also, I must apologize."

It was a clear male voice.

Fujiko and the others all turned in that direction.

They saw a boy who seemed to have come from the jungle. He had a slim but noble appearance.

He had long hair and wore old-fashioned armor.

"My name is Yoshihiko. Please listen to what I have to say."

Yoshie was not surprised by the change to her appearance.

She had modified the virtual alternate dimension so that change would occur.

—I'm glad I loaded the game data just in case.

To escape 2V, she had used a game of her own design as the rules for the virtual alternate dimension. It was the imaginative fantasy war game based on the first demon king war that Keena had played.

—Now, then. The rules of the game are gradually coming back to me, so I need to figure out what to do.

Yoshie thought calmly about how to oppose 2V's plan.

She had fled into the virtual alternate dimension in order to protect Akuto. And she had the control device. It could not be interfered with from outside. 2V's arm had made it inside, but she had yet to find it. However, she doubted it could influence anything.

—If the game's program is altered from the outside, this could be bad. But any fundamental changes would effectively make the student's hostages, so it should be impossible.

She doubted even 2V would do anything which would cause an indiscriminate slaughter. The one thing known for sure about him was that he worked for the government.

—That means my goal is to contact the demon king. And if I can eliminate 2V before that, I'll do that. That sums it up well enough.

After gathering her thoughts, Yoshie decided to appear before the students. Given what would happen afterwards, she could not tell them the truth of the plan, but she had to take responsibility for getting them involved.

—But this should be perfectly safe. After all, the rules of the game control this world. And I designed the game, so I understand this world better than anyone.

"Yes. In other words, we can assume this is the world within a story or within a video game!"

As soon as she exited the jungle and walked onto the schoolyard, she heard a beautiful voice.

—Fwohfff! Someone already understands the situation? I had heard this was an excellent school, but that's amazing.

Yoshie was impressed and she took a step forward.

And then she realized she had yet to decide how to speak as a guy.

—Oh, crap. I never did a voice chat or anything. How should I speak to sound masculine? Um...Oh, I know. I just have to speak like the guys in otome games.

Otome games were games girls played to enjoy virtual romances with beautiful boys. Naturally, only extremely beautiful boys appeared in them. Yoshie had limited samples to draw from when it came to boys, so she had no other choice here.

“Exactly. I shall explain the rest. Also, I must apologize.”

Yoshie was surprised to hear her voice had become male as well, but she was satisfied because it sounded exactly like a character from an otome game.

“My name is Yoshihiko. Please listen to what I have to say,” said Yoshie.

“You will explain? You must apologize?”

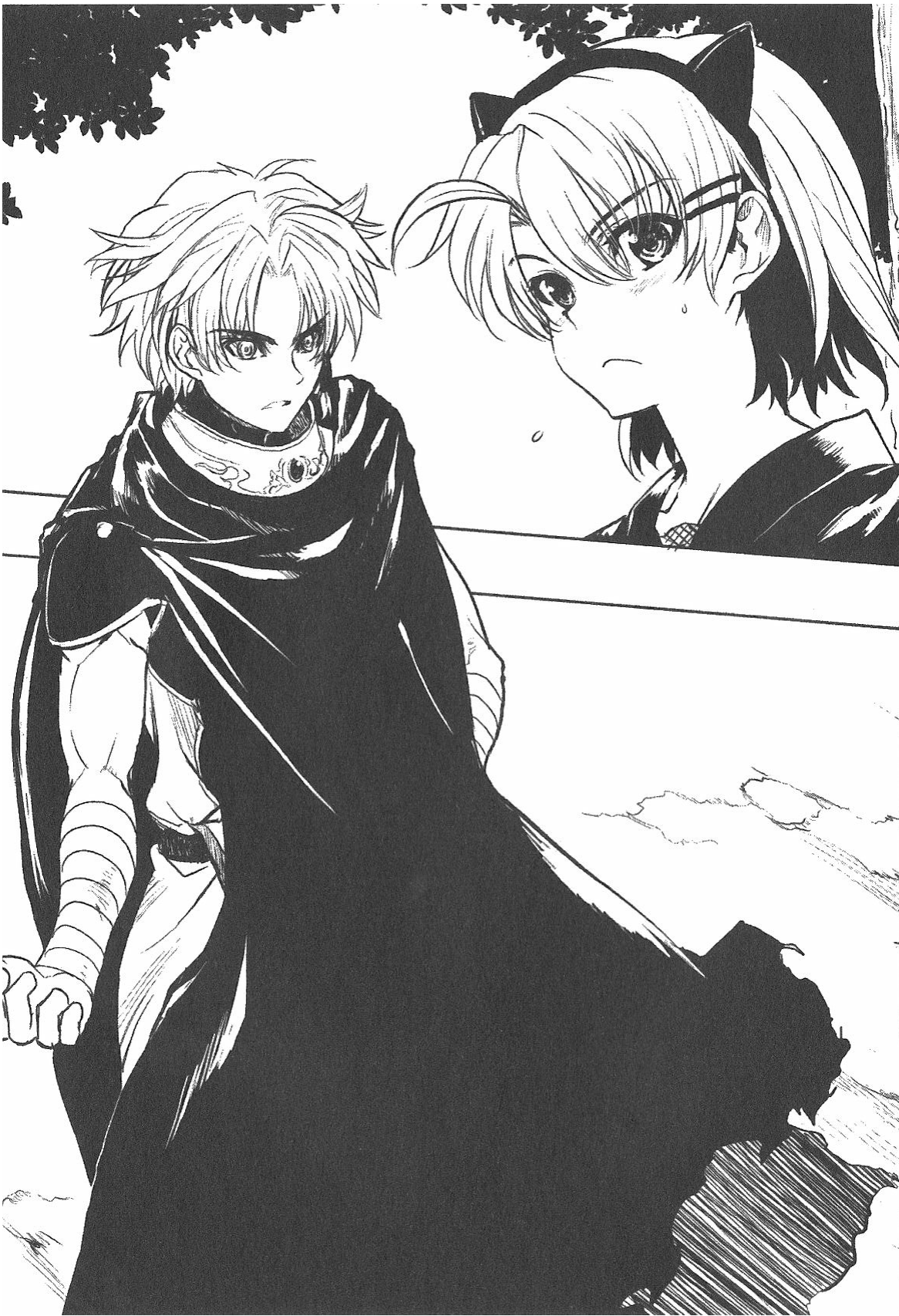
The students all began asking questions at once. Countless gazes poured onto Yoshie. She was not very good at speaking directly with people, but she decided she could manage while using a different face.

“This is an experiment in controlling the virtual alternate dimension. It was originally meant to be a small-scale experiment, but all of you were caught up in it by mistake.”

That comment brought on cries of anger and fear.

Yoshie’s face clouded over with fear.

“Wait. Please calm down and listen.”



A voice cut in to rein in the students. The voice belonged to a girl with short hair and a dignified aura.

"I am Hattori Junko. Please continue."

The girl naming herself Junko nodded toward Yoshie. Yoshie smiled back.

"Thank you."

But Junko averted her gaze. Yoshie was disappointed her thanks had been denied, but she had to continue speaking.

"That is what I must apologize for. But please do not worry. The experiment was in creating a virtual reality game. As long as you heed the warnings I give you, you are in no danger."

"Warnings?"

"In other words, I will tell you the rules of the game. First, you might truly die if you do not return to the real world within a week of in-game time."

"Eh? Then how can you say we aren't in any danger!?"

"M-my apologies. I am only saying this for your safety. One week is the longest anyone has been able to remain within the virtual alternate dimension. It is being controlled this time, so you will likely be safe even if you stay longer than that. However, no food is being brought in from outside. One week in-game is equivalent to a dozen or so hours in reality. Your physical bodies will not starve or die of thirst in that time."

"...I see."

"Second, even if you die in this world, you will simply return to the real world. In other words, you can return by dying."

"Eh?"

Everyone was surprised to hear that.

"I'm not sure I can believe that."

Everyone began giving similar comments and tilting their heads.

—It is true that would be hard to believe. Um...what should I do? I know!

"Are there any animals around here? Were there any being raised in the academy?" asked Yoshie.

One of the students pointed toward the edge of the school building. A chicken coop had existed there, but it was gone now. However, a chicken was wandering around.

"Huh? The coop is gone, but the chicken is still here."

"Please watch that chicken."

Yoshie drew a dagger kept in her armor and threw it toward the

chicken. The sharp tip sliced the chicken's neck apart.

"How could you!?"

Some of the female students screamed and covered their eyes, but the ones closely watching the chicken let out gasps of surprise.

The severed chicken head and the body that continued running for a few steps both blurred and then disappeared. It was reminiscent of watching a video disappear.

"Eh?"

Voices of surprise rose from the students.

Yoshie grinned inwardly.

—Fwohhh! That's a game for you. I'd never hit throwing a dagger in real life, but it was dead on. I was too panicked to notice it before, but being in a video game is even better than I had imagined. Wait, I have to continue my explanation.

"Now, the animals created within here are different."

Yoshie picked up the dagger that had soaked in the chicken's blood but now shined spotlessly. He turned toward the jungle and spotted an animal walking out. It was a rabbit.

"Watch that rabbit."

Yoshie held up the dagger once more.

"Eh? But it's so cute. Can't we just catch it?"

A girl near the rabbit walked toward it.

The rabbit's red eyes rolled around in its head and its ears stood up. Its cute behavior drew the girl even closer.

"Watch out!" shouted Yoshie.

"Eh?"

The girl was confused.

And the rabbit jumped.

But this was not a cute little hop. It leaped straight toward the girl with obvious intent to kill.

"Shaaaahhh!"

With that strange cry, fangs that looked like sharp knives grew from the rabbit's mouth.

"Kyaaaah!"

The girl covered her face with her hands, but the rabbit shot straight toward her throat. If its fangs pierced her throat, it would rip out her carotid artery.

However, Yoshie lopped off the rabbit's head before it could reach the girl.

With two dull sounds, the rabbit's head and body fell separately to the ground. The blood oozing from the wound stained the ground. Sticky blood could be seen on the dagger sticking into the ground.

"It isn't disappearing?" muttered the girl.

"This is a murderous headhunting rabbit. I think you should understand now that this is a game. And you should understand what it means to die here. This corpse will disappear after a while, but it will remain much longer than that of a life form brought in here."

Junko spoke up as Yoshie gave her explanation.

"But telling us to die in order to return is a problem. I will not go so far as to say you are lying, but it might not work right and people will have a mental reluctance to die. Is there no better way?"

As Yoshie thought how to answer that, a beautiful girl with long hair

spoke.

"I believe the condition to leave the virtual alternate dimension is to complete the planned events here."

The girl was Fujiko. Yoshie realized she was the same one who had made the perceptive realization earlier.

"Yes. Completing the game will likely allow us to leave. I will now give a simple explanation of the game's rules. Your roles here have been determined by your personalities. While here, you will fight, obtain victory, gain experience, and level up. As this is an experiment into the effectiveness of using the virtual alternate dimension, the combat and magic skills you gain here will remain with you when you return to the real world. Your brain will have learned the behavior patterns. It is the same as never forgetting how to ride a bike once you learn how."

The more perceptive students gave joyous comments when they heard that.

"That's great. So if we keep defeating things like that rabbit over the week we spend here, we'll have learned combat magic we couldn't learn at most training grounds."

—Now they should be able to enjoy this game.

Yoshie was delighted and she nodded.

"Now, please try to open a mana screen just as you do when checking

the internet in reality," she instructed.

Everyone opened a mana screen in their student handbooks. It displayed various parameters and the available in-game commands.

"You can see your parameters and the commands related to the rules. These may change, so keep an eye on them as you take action. The special characteristic of this game is the ability to command armies of NPCs. The size of that army will increase as you level up, so use them to their fullest."

As Yoshie spoke, Fujiko asked a question.

"What is needed to complete the game?"

"This game is won by defeating the demon king."

The instant Yoshie said that, the schoolyard's atmosphere changed.

"Defeat?"

"The demon king?"

A stir ran through the students.

"Come to think of it, Sai Akuto isn't here."

“Soga Keena and Korone are gone, too.”

The students spoke as they glanced around the area.

—That’s an odd reaction. Is he hated because he’s the demon king?

One’s role in the game was determined based on one’s personality. That meant Akuto would naturally become the demon king.

Yoshie felt the conversation heading in an odd direction, but the surrounding atmosphere then veered in an even more dangerous direction.

“Nice! So we have to defeat the demon king to escape this place! We can get back at him for everything we go through on a daily basis! And defeating the demon king is sure to give you tons of experience, right?”

“Plus there’s no risk in dying. Not that I want to go out of my way to die.”

That understanding spread through the students and their muttering began to change to cries of joy.

—Huh? Huh? This has gotten strange. Let’s see... What should I do? I need to settle things here.

Yoshie began to panic. She was also worried by 2V’s presence. He was an uncertain factor and she had no idea what he would do.

—But I have this armor as a last resort. Although it's only any good as a reset switch. I need to gather the students and bring them all back to the real world.

Yoshie stroked a hand along the armor she wore. That armor was the current appearance of the virtual alternate dimension control device.

"It seems a human will has altered this world," said Korone as she stared at a mana screen.

"That happened before, right? We managed to alter the contents of a book to a certain extent," said Akuto with a nod.

"We have been given the roles that suit us best in this game world and can leave once the game has been completed. It is the same as before."

Korone had been the first to realize a mana screen could be opened. She had read through the manual and grasped most of what Yoshie had explained.

"The roles that suit us best?" complained Akuto.

Akuto, Korone, and Keena were in the main hall of a huge castle. The inside was dimly lit, a luxurious gold throne sat in the center of the back wall, and a red carpet stretched out before it.

Sitting in that throne was Akuto who wore gauntlets with claws, spiked shoulder armor, and other overly ornamental armor. In other words, he was dressed in the perfect final boss style.

"A-chan, you look so cool."

Keena was enjoying herself. She wore a robe and appeared to be a priest.

"I wish I had been a princess, but I guess it would've have been weird for the demon king to come rescue the captured princess."

Keena opened a mana screen and checked her parameters.

Class: Priest

Level: 10

HP: 20

Strength: 6

Magic: 18

Army: 10000

"Army?"

"This game lets you command an army, right?"

Keena snapped her fingers. A line of warrior priests who wore white cloaks over their armor appeared in the hall.

"I see. So you play at war."

Akuto nodded in understanding. At the same moment, he had an unpleasant thought.

"That means everyone will be coming to defeat me, doesn't it?"

"Yes. By the way, don't you usually start at Level 1? Are we being given special treatment because we are the enemies?"

"Come to think of it, you might be right."

Korone's comment led Akuto to open a mana screen of his own.

Class: Demon King

Level: 99

HP: 9999

Strength: 25

Magic: 25

Army: 200000

"They're all at the max values."

"It seems the human limits for strength and magic are set at 18."

Keena and Korone both commented on Akuto's parameters.

It was a complicated feeling for Akuto.

"If I'm this strong, everyone will attack me at once, won't they? But if I let them defeat me, the game will end, right? Maybe that's for the best."

"Ehhh? You can't do that. You have to enjoy the game," complained Keena.

However, Akuto had no obligation to listen to her.

"No. Everyone might be in danger if a week passes. It would be best if I lost as soon as possible. In fact, maybe I should kill myself right here..."

"Wait a second."

Korone stopped Akuto with a serious tone of voice. Her tone of voice was always serious, but it had a sense of urgency now.

"What is it?"

"I have looked over the data as much as I can from inside, but there seem to be some dangerous elements."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes. It seems three elements are influencing this world. I predict their interference will lead to effects not in the original program."

"Three elements?"

"The first is Soga Keena. In other words, you."

Korone pointed at Keena and Keena looked confused.

"Me?"

"It seems this interference with the virtual alternate dimension is

possible by using your mana vibrations. In other words, you can change the rules with your will."

"Change the rules? I won't do that. After all, this is the game I know," said Keena with a smile.

However, Akuto understood what Korone meant.

"I see. It was Keena's power that brought us into that book, too. Was it because Keena knew the rules this world is based on that we entered so easily this time?"

"Most likely."

"But I don't see how that's dangerous. We can leave after Keena enjoys the game a bit."

"Allow me to continue. The second element is that the virtual alternate dimension control device was brought into this world."

"Wouldn't that kind of thing normally be left outside?"

"Yes. There must have been some kind of mistake. This means the control device can interfere with itself. Depending on what happens, it is possible we could fall into an irrecoverable situation that cannot be controlled."

"That sounds serious...but you said there's another dangerous

element?"

Akuto gulped. It seemed they could not simply enjoy the game.

"The third is an existence inside the virtual alternate dimension that does not obey the rules."

"Eh? How could that be? Wasn't everything here created around those rules?"

"I do not know the cause, but my analysis of all the data shows there is someone not following those rules."

"Understood. Let's assume this person is here. How is it a problem?"

"I cannot predict what small problems it will cause, but I can predict one major problem it will cause. If someone is harmed by this existence not following the rules, they will be truly damaged rather than simply taking damage in the game."

"That...really is dangerous."

Akuto realized the gravity of the situation.

If this person ignoring the rules attacked and killed a student, that student would not return to the real world. They would truly die.

"Where is this person who can ignore the rules?"

"I do not know and it is likely impossible to know. I do not even know if they have malicious intentions. The odds are high that the accident you fear will not occur. However, if they do mean harm, the students will be killed while believing it is only a game."

"Understood. Either way, we don't have time to enjoy this. We need to exit this world immediately."

Akuto began to stand up from his throne, but Korone stopped him.

"You cannot do that. The game's rules do not allow the demon king to commit suicide. In other words, even if you disappeared, the program would produce an NPC to take your place. You would escape, but the other students would still be in danger."

"Oh, I see."

"Nevertheless, finishing the game quickly would be safest."

"Then isn't there almost nothing I can do? I just have to be killed without putting up much of a fight."

"No, there is a simpler way."

"A simpler way? How could there be?"

Akuto shook his head, but Korone replied with a serious expression.

"We slaughter them all."

"What?"

"We achieve absolute victory by slaughtering them all. The demon king sends out his army to kill all of the attacking adventurers and achieve game over."

"W-wait. But that..."

Akuto could not help but hesitate.

"What are you afraid of? The more time passes, the more the uncertain factors will grow. Also, our opponent's levels will rise. Providing them a swift death would be the safest for everyone involved," said Korone plainly.

She was right. Akuto could see no holes in her argument.

"But..."

"No buts. We will hunt down the adventurers while they are still inexperienced. Let us make it rain blood. Or perhaps it would be more efficient to capture them, gather them in one spot, and bury them alive. At any rate, it is crucial that we kill them efficiently. That is the final solution."

Korone moved her face toward Akuto. The look in her eyes was serious. The look in her eyes was always serious, but it looked even more serious than usual.

"...Do you want to kill them by any chance? Do you see this as a game?"

"Of course not. Oh, driving them all to a cliff and sending a stampede of cattle to send them off the cliff would be both efficient and quite a spectacle."

As she spoke, Korone kneeled before Akuto.

"Give me the order and I, Demon General Korone, shall make a bloodbath out of the rebels."

"...You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

Akuto was conflicted, but Korone's idea was the safest if he ignored her cruel jokes.

"Understood. I'll leave it to you."

"Thank you very much. I ensure you I will bring victory to the demon king. All hail the magnificent demon king! Glory to evil!"

Korone thrust a hand into the air and Keena delightedly joined in.

"Glory to evil!"

"Glory to evil!"

And then more voices joined in. At some point, the large hall had become filled with soldiers in black armor and ugly demonic beasts. They raised a storm of growls, stomped their feet enough to shake the earth below them, and swung their arms up into the air as well.

"Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil!"

—Even if this is a game...this has gotten out of hand...

Akuto silently complained.

Chapter 3: The Demon King and the Whereabouts of the Holy Grail

"Luckily, I can communicate inside if the communication unit itself is on the other side. I was right to send just my arm inside."

2V had transformed into a snake. Or more accurately, the severed arm of 2V's doll had become a snake.

The arm had a communication unit installed, so it could act on its own. It was installed with all the equipment needed to act as a hidden camera and gather information.

The snake hid in the jungle and watched Yoshie and the students. The plain green snake blended into that world quite well.

"It seems that girl managed to escape into this world well enough, but there is something I did not tell her. If my information is accurate, someone was lurking within this virtual alternate dimension long before we arrived. Now, what effect will that have on this world? I need to reach this person before anyone else does," muttered 2V.

Someone had been lurking in that world from the beginning. That had to be related to the uncertain element.

"I need to do more research into this. Fortunately, the priests of Megis do not seem to have noticed yet."

While muttering to herself, 2V transferred her consciousness to a doll in the real world. This was the man with the forgettable face that 2V often used. The doll was currently inside the temple of Megis's data room. The

room contained nothing but a few specialized terminals, but those terminals provided access to a large number of files.

2V searched for the file her researcher colleague had once seen. It contained information on the original demon king.

It took some time, but 2V found a few files on the subject. And they told her something astonishing.

“This is it! It’s just as I thought... No, it’s even better!”

“I feel I am in no position to ask you to do what I say, but I would like to give you some advice so as to avoid any possible danger.”

Yoshie (as Yoshihiko) addressed the crowd.

Whether the students gathered in the schoolyard were listening or not, a great stir was running through them. Half of them seemed uneasy and the other half seemed prepared to let loose and enjoy the game. Either way, they were restless.

—This is a problem. I need to ensure they all return safely to reality and I need to find 2V and Sai Akuto.

Yoshie opened a screen and checked on the current situation.

She was using her special rights as the programmer of that world to

check the program directly.

Just as Korone had, Yoshie learned there was someone within the virtual alternate dimension who was not obeying the rules of the game.

—2V? No, he was drawn in just like me, so that couldn't be it. And it's just his arm, so he shouldn't be able to do much. In that case, could there have been someone in here from the beginning? At any rate, this is dangerous. If the others come into contact with this person, they could be killed!

Yoshie panicked, but she still did not think she could say anything that would convince the students.

"This isn't good. Can I really get up on the podium and give them orders?" muttered Yoshie.

If it was necessary, she would have to do it, but it would require the strength of commanding an army. She honestly felt it would be difficult for someone like her.

"Knowledge-wise, I do not think anyone but you can do it," whispered Junko who had apparently heard what Yoshie had said.

—Eh?

Yoshie looked over in surprise. Junko was smiling in order to cheer her up.

“B-but I am an outsider and I have never held authority over anyone before. Will they really listen to me?”

“If you are worried about that, I can speak for you. And even if you do not want that, I must insist that I help in whatever way I can,” said Junko.

—She must be a nice person to be helping me here. This is a huge help in a trying time like this.

Yoshie relaxed and managed to smile.

—Let’s see. I need to thank her. I’m a guy right now, so I need to smile like an otome game character.

“I am truly grateful that you would say that. It seems my worries were unnecessary.”

—Will that make me sound cool?

But despite Yoshie’s thoughts, Junko turned away when she saw Yoshie’s smile.

“I did not mean it like that. I am saying I do not trust you.”

—Hm, looks like it didn’t work. Well, this is no time to be getting down over that.

"Then please speak for me. That is just one less thing I must worry about."

"Okay... As long as you understand," mumbled Junko.

Yoshie stepped up onto the podium.

"Everyone, please listen. I would like to apologize again as the one who created this situation. I would also like to ask for your cooperation. I ask your permission to stand atop the podium like this. But I am not asking you to obey my orders. You may not trust me, but I only want to say one thing: if you act carefully here, you can return safely to the real world while enjoying yourselves."

Focus gathered on Yoshie. Everyone seemed willing to listen to her for the moment.

"Thank you for listening. I already gave you an overview of the situation. If you refuse to believe what I said, that is fine. I merely ask for your cooperation in leaving this place. I believe we need someone to take command and I believe she would be suitable."

Yoshie pointed toward Junko.

"Ohhh!" said the students.

Several of them voiced their approval.

"Having Hattori-san as our leader should be fine."

"I hear she played a major role in the demon king war."

"You hear a lot about her relationship with the demon king, but she did fight in that war."

Junko's mouth opened in a surprised O, but she stepped up onto the podium when Yoshie reached a hand out to her. However, she refused to hold Yoshie's hand.

"I believe we should act on our own a bit longer before deciding whether we should trust him. Until then, let us work together and act carefully as we fight in our quest for power and experience!"

The crowd let out an excited cry in response to Junko's words.

Yoshie was quite impressed.

—She's really cool. I wish I could do things like that.

Overcome with admiration, Yoshie whispered to Junko without thinking.

"They really trust you."

"R-really? I would not say so," mumbled Junko as she blushed.

—She's being modest.

Yoshie placed her left hand on Junko's shoulder and raised her own right hand. In the space beyond that hand, a large map appeared. It showed the continent of that world.

"This is what this land looks like. Let us explore it under her command. Once you gather experience, you will gain an army of your own and be able to explore without doing anything yourself. Let us enjoy this peacefully, gain experience which can be used even in the real world, and then return! But not even I know exactly what will happen. It would be safest to gather in a single group and-..."

Yoshie suddenly trailed off.

She had heard a tremendous noise similar to an earthquake.

It came from the jungle, so everyone in the schoolyard turned in that direction.

A cloud of dust rose up from the jungle and it gradually drew closer.

"Wh-what is this?" asked Junko.

But Yoshie was just as confused by the dust.

"D-do not tell me you do not know what this is."

Junko's eyes opened wide in surprise.

—I-I need to put everyone at ease. This is probably an army and only the demon king's side could have one already.

"N-no. I was merely surprised because this is too soon."

"Too soon?"

"Only the demon king's side could command an army of that size right now. However, it would take extraordinary judgment to take action so quickly. We still have not grasped the rules!" said Yoshie in shock.

But she did not know what to say beyond that. As she stood frozen in place, Junko raised her voice.

"Everyone, prepare for battle! This is the demon king's army!"

That voice brought Yoshie back to her senses.

—I know this is a game, but when I'm experiencing it with my actual senses, I can't do anything.

But Yoshie realized this was no time to be feeling down. She checked on the students' situation once more.

There were five hundred students in all.

They were students of Constant Magic Academy, so their combat ability would be top notch. They would not give in mentally either. However, when they tried to obey Junko's order by using the weapons or magic they specialized in, they learned once more that this was not the real world.

"H-huh? My special baton...?"

"I have a knife, but I can't fill it with mana!"

"I can't use my reinforcing magic!"

The students stood still and almost completely defenseless. All five hundred of them were bunched together.

"Th-this makes them an excellent target!"

Junko frantically turned to Yoshie.

Yoshie was desperately trying to gather her thoughts.

If the demon king was attacking, there was a possibility Akuto would come himself. He had seemed intelligent, so he would be trying to free the students as quickly as possible. In that case, it would be possible to speak with him. And if all the students were killed here, that might very well solve the problem. However, Yoshie was bothered by the existence of

an uncertain element. Until she knew how that would affect things, she wanted to avoid having the students die.

After gathering her thoughts, Yoshie raised her voice once more.

"Into the school building! I will handle the army!" she shouted.

Junko looked over and nodded.

"I will go, too."

Junko jumped down from the podium, passed through the rows of confused students, and began running toward the edge of the schoolyard.

"Me too!"

As Yoshie followed after her, students armed with knives and other weapons began following as well.

The cloud of dust in the jungle approached them like a giant moving wall. The earthquake-like noise roared loud enough to rob them of their hearing.

Some of the five hundred students fled and some followed Yoshie. And before their eyes, the jungle split open.

A giant rhinoceros appeared, crushing the trees of the jungle underfoot. It looked five meters tall. Rhinoceroses were not usually violent beasts, but this one had a ferocious light in its red eyes and it charged forward with the speed of a horse.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha! The demon king's army has taken the first strike! I am Demon General Korone! I have come to slaughter you all on the demon king's orders!"

Standing imposingly atop the rhinoceros's saddle was a lovely girl wearing a magician's outfit. This girl declaring her intent to slaughter them yet showing no change of expression was of course Korone.

This stopped Yoshie and the students' charge.

"Wah!"

"Wh-what is that!?"

"This is bad..."

"What kind of game is this!? It's impossible!"

The students began screaming.

Yoshie and Junko were forced to stop as well.

"Wh-who is she?"

"That is Korone, a L'Isle-Adam observer. She observes our famous student, Sai Akuto," quickly answered Junko.

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"That is good to hear. We might be able to talk this out."



"I am not sure she will listen. She was put on the enemy's side in here, right? Korone is the type to get carried away at times like this," said Junko while unsure what to do.

And that was precisely what happened.

"I am not here to talk! I already told you this is a slaughter!"

Korone's voice was emotionless, but that alone made it all the more frightening.

As Korone rode the rhinoceros (technically it was a game monster known as a Behemoth), she held out her staff and a green beam of light shot out. That beam cut between the swiftly fleeing students. An instant later, a tremendous explosion occurred along the path the beam had travelled. Several of the students were blown into the air.

"Gyaaah!"

"Eeeee!"

Two of them turned to dust and vanished in midair. They had died in the game.

"It's still going according to the system."

Yoshie was relieved.

And she shouted toward Korone.

"Wait! An uncertain element has slipped into this game!"

Korone replied more obediently than Yoshie had expected. The Behemoth stopped in front of them and she looked down at Yoshie and Junko.

"I am aware. That is why I am slaughtering the students to send them back to the real world as quickly as possible. I have examined the data myself. From that speech earlier, I take it you are this game's creator."

"I am. So you knew that there is someone not obeying the game's rules?"

Yoshie was even more relieved.

"Yes. But humans are inconvenient creatures. They could easily return to the real world if they let me kill them, but they insist on resisting."

"I think being afraid of that is normal," muttered Junko.

Korone nodded in response.

"But that fear can be useful. I can efficiently kill them as they flee."

After crossing her arms and making that bold announcement, Korone swung the staff in her hand. Monsters under her control such as goblins and orcs charged out from the path created by the Behemoth. These five thousand NPC troops were half of the ten thousand Korone could command. As if ink had been spilled on a piece of drawing paper, they dyed one end of the schoolyard black as they surged out.

They ran by Yoshie and Junko who had remained and they began stabbing the fleeing students in the back.

"Waaaaah!"

"Nooooo!"

Student after student screamed and turned to dust.

"Kill the men! Rape the women!" shouted Korone expressionlessly and emotionlessly.

"I had always thought she was a dangerous artificial person..." said Junko in shock.

"I-is all of this part of a carefully calculated plan?" asked Yoshie.

Korone nodded and replied, "Of course. I am aiming for an efficient game over. If you leave it to me, I believe I can easily lead this to an annihilation ending."

"B-but I have some responsibility for this. I would like for you to leave it to me," said Yoshie.

Korone shook her head.

"That is all the more reason to send the other students back as soon as possible. I could also abduct you here." Korone glanced at Junko. "If you are abducted, you will be forced to appear before Akuto-san while wearing lewd clothing. This game has rules for creating offspring, so if a man and woman spend the night in the same room, a message appears saying 'we sure had fun last night, didn't we?'"

A blush exploded across Junko's face.

"Y-y-you fool! I would never do that!"

"But you did imagine it just a bit, didn't you?"

"S-stop that! Do not tease me!"

"At any rate, I will be solemnly advancing the game. If you do not like it, then advance the game yourselves as the protagonists. I will eliminate the other students, so please take a short nap. Once you wake up, make your way to the demon king's castle."

Korone swung her staff and a beam of light shot from it.

"Watch out!"

Yoshie covered for Junko, but the beam pierced through both Yoshihiko and Junko's bodies.

"Wha-...!?"

Yoshie and Junko groaned in pain.

—Even as a game, it still hurts.

Just as Yoshie had that thought, she realized what Korone had done. That had not been a fatal blow. It had only been meant to knock them out.

And then the two of them lost consciousness.

Let us move back in time just a bit.

One of the first students to flee into the school building when Korone attacked was Fujiko.

—This may be a game, but I do not like the thought being killed. And something seemed unnatural about how that Yoshihiko was acting. I need to live on and investigate this.

The structure of the school building had not changed, but the contents were quite different. The classrooms were now strategy rooms or weapon storerooms.

—Weapons... Perfect.

Fujiko turned around and spoke to those behind her.

“There are weapons here! Everyone, take something to fight with!”

Amid the long lines of spears, the piles of countless swords, and all the other weapons, Fujiko chose a whip because she was used to using one in real life. She attached it at the waist.

The students who had fled took weapons one after another. As the weapon storeroom began to grow crowded, Fujiko heard a voice from the next room over.

“There are grimoires in here! If your class lets you use them, get in here!”

—Come to think of it, I never checked on my class.

Fujiko opened a screen.

Class: Potion Master

Level: 1

HP: 5

Strength: 8

Magic: 15

Army: 0

—So there is an army stat. This does not provide much explanation, but it is obvious what that lets you do after seeing what Korone did. I need to raise my level some way or another. This may be a game, but I need to gain as much experience as I can to help me in the real world. ...And most importantly, I have to help Akuto-sama grow even stronger.

Fujiko secretly decided to betray the others.

—That means I need to raise everyone's levels, strengthen them, and then have Akuto-sama defeat them. That sounds like the best plan.

With her mind made up, Fujiko headed to the neighboring grimoire room. She chose a grimoire of the Level 1 magic she could use and carried the book under her arm. When she saw most of the students had completed their preparations, she raised her voice.

"Everyone! This fortress will inevitably fall! We must split up and flee into the jungle! We will raise our level there and gather our own armies. Once the time to defeat the demon king has arrived, I will light a beacon so we can gather once more!"

Voices of approval came one after another.

"That's right. That's the best plan for us."

"We can have a bit more fun."

"Everything feels so real in here, so I don't want to die."

"We can split up into groups of two or three."

The students began to leave the grimoire and weapon rooms.

"Onee-sama! We can flee together!"

Three underclassmen who adored Fujiko ran up to her. Fujiko smiled and nodded.

"Yes, let us do that. Are your preparations complete?"

Fujiko and the girls left the room together.

The chaos had reached the hallway. The students had no solid leadership, so they had erred in their timing on closing the entrance. Korone's monster army was crossing swords with the students in the hallway. Cries of anger and the high-pitched clashing of swords hurt Fujiko's ears.

"Onee-sama! Hurry!"

One girl pulled on Fujiko's hand.

But Fujiko had a different idea as she fled.

—If I am right, this might not be as difficult as I thought.

Fujiko looked at the three girls with her. They seemed truly afraid of the situation. That was understandable. The sensations were all too real.

—That means their judgment is impaired right now.

Fujiko grinned inwardly. Fujiko chose a different route from the other students. Fujiko and the three girls were the only ones running through that specific hallway. However, a single orc soldier was catching up to them. The three girls seemed to have no intention of fighting.

"You three run on ahead!" ordered Fujiko.

They did exactly that. They worriedly turned back toward Fujiko, but Fujiko called out to them again and they looked forward once more.

And Fujiko did not overlook that timing. She swung her whip toward the orc soldier and the end of the whip splendidly wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

"Hah!"

She pulled the whip back, taking the sword with it.

Fujiko made no attempt to stop the whip's momentum. The sword flew straight toward the back of one of the fleeing girls.

"Kyaaaah!"

The sword stabbed deep into the girl's back and she collapsed. She immediately turned to dust, leaving only the sword behind.

—Just as I thought.

Fujiko grinned.

The other students likely thought the dead girl had been killed by the orc soldier.

—You get quite a bit of experience for killing a player!

Fujiko had gained a level. She defeated the now weaponless orc soldier with several strikes of the whip.

And she met up with the two surviving girls with a perfectly calm expression.

"Are you okay!?"

"Yes, but it looks like one of us was stabbed by the sword that orc soldier threw..."

"There is no need to be sad. It may have been a shocking scene, but this is only a game."

Fujiko grinned.

"I killed 357 of them."

Korone kneeled before Akuto after returning to the castle.

"Wow! That's amazing, Korone-chan!"

Keena clapped her hands in delight as she leaned up against Akuto's shoulder.

"You're making us look like a horribly evil army, so stop that," complained Akuto from where he sat on the throne.

"This is all about setting the right mood," explained Korone before holding a crystal ball out toward Akuto.

It showed the destroyed school building, the ruined schoolyard, and the corpses of orc soldiers.

"That looks pretty bad. But I don't see any bodies of students."

"Yes. Everything remained within the boundaries of the game."

Korone lowered the crystal ball and opened a large screen in midair.

"And here you can see everyone's resentment."

"Resentment?"

Akuto peered at the screen. It was an online message board.

127 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:mKq7EtZhO

That hurt. I thought this was a game.

128 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:kAE5SjWcO

When Sai Akuto gets back to reality, I'm gonna kill him.

129 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:JW75Oizl0

If you died, it just means you're weak. Give it up. orz

130 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:KtBdqH4A0

I almost came when Korone-chan personally killed me.

131 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:e9qeMSmd0

I was crushed by a rhino. \ (^o^) /

"Well, as long as they're alive..."

Akuto was not sure how to feel, so he just sighed.

"It seems we can view the game's real world message board from here. They can apparently see a portion of the game."

"A portion?"

"It seems they can see the overall picture and the numerical data. I checked on the message board."

"So it's the same as when we were in that book. It seemed senpai could

see the overall picture of the story then. At any rate, I'm glad we can get some data from outside."

Akuto nodded.

"Now then. I will go hunt down the remnants."

Korone stood to leave.

"Could you stop making this sound so horrible?"

"A slaughter is not over until everyone is dead."

Korone made it sound all the more horrible, but Keena cut in.

"Wait. This is kind of weird."

"Weird?"

Akuto turned toward her.

"I think the game has changed a bit."

Keena motioned them over while looking at the screen.

"How has it changed?"

“Well, the final objective was to defeat the demon king, right? That’s changed to acquiring the holy grail.”

She pointed at the screen Korone had opened. It did indeed give the conditions to clear the game.

“Did someone change the game? You said there was an uncertain element. Does this mean that person has begun to act?” asked Akuto uneasily.

Korone nodded.

“In that case, I must slaughter them as quickly as possible. I will slaughter them without a moment’s rest. I will give my undivided attention to the slaughter.”

“This is the first time I’ve seen you this motivated,” complained Akuto.

Meanwhile, in the real world.

“What did you say happened to my school?” asked Lily in a displeased voice.

She had already heard the situation. She had returned to the school after all the students had disappeared, but then students had started to appear here and there. And they were all insisting on the ridiculous idea

that they had been caught inside a video game.

"But if the virtual alternate dimension was used, it could make sense, arinsu."

"Uga."

"In fact, this kind of supports the information we had gathered, gya. The plan was to seal the demon king in the virtual alternate dimension, gya"

The three officers attempted to pacify Lily as she groaned within the student council room.

"If there's a connection between this game and the virtual alternate dimension, shouldn't you investigate the creator of the game?" asked Hiroshi as he looked at the mana screen.

He was also in the student council room because he had been forcibly dragged into all this and could no longer back out.

"The creator?"

Lily looked over at the mana screen disinterestedly, but gasped when she saw the name.

"Yoshihiko? Yoshihiko... Kanna, you were pursuing a Kita Yoshie, right?"

"Yes, gya. I think she's definitely involved with this somehow, gya. But all her data was erased and she's currently missing, gya."

"That's because Yoshihiko is in the game!"

Lily stood up.

"What are you going to do, gya?"

"It's nothing but circumstantial evidence, but it's enough to make some threats! I need to go get some information from the people with a connection to her," said Lily energetically.

"That sounds really dangerous..." said Hiroshi worriedly, but Lily grabbed his hand. "Eh?"

"You're coming, too! You're already part of all this."

"Wah! W-wait! Give me a break, president!"

But Hiroshi's protests were splendidly ignored.

"Nn..."

Junko woke up.

Once she remembered why she had passed out, she forcefully sat up. Unlike in reality, her mind was perfectly clear after waking up in the game. She had no headache and her body moved smoothly.

"What...?"

Junko saw the ruined schoolyard. Korone's army had already left, the school building had tragically crumbled, and the students were nowhere to be seen.

"Kh... So this is what it feels like to lose a battle. I know this is just a game, but it does not feel good. We need to take the initiative from now on."

Yoshihiko looked up from where he lay collapsed next to her. His well-featured face was twisted in non-physical pain. Junko understood how he felt. He regretted that so many students had died due to him.

"I know this does not feel good, but if we do not focus, we will not get another chance. Then again, this is just a game, so maybe we do not need to think about it so seriously."

Junko smiled at him.

Yoshihiko's eyes opened in admiration.

"Amazing. You said your name is Hattori-san, correct? You're used to fighting, aren't you?"

"I do not think that is a good compliment to give to a girl."

When Junko intentionally pouted a bit, Yoshihiko finally smiled.

"My apologies. You are right. To phrase it better, I was struck by your nobility."

Yoshihiko's smile looked very bright to Junko, but that was not simply because of his looks. It was due to his carefree and honest expression and the fact that the compliment came from his heart.

—This is the second time a boy has viewed me so positively.

That thought suddenly came to Junko, but she frantically shook her head and worked to keep it from showing on her face.

"I-I will accept that compliment. A-anyway, how many people do you think escaped?"

Yoshihiko opened a screen.

"A lot of them were killed. About three hundred. We were beaten down splendidly. The efficiency approached the limits of the settings. There are some parts of command that your parameters cannot make up for. This was simply the player's skill."

"That is amazing," commented Junko in admiration.

She knew Korone's combat command ability came from being a L'Isle-Adam, but she still admired her for it.

"But that is not actually a problem. The skill of that L'Isle-Adam means more of the students will be returned to reality."

"But the students at our school are used to fighting. It seems they scattered into the jungle. They likely plan to kill the demon king in order to clear the game."

"In that case, we must go too."

Yoshihiko stood up.

"Go? Go where?"

Junko was confused.

Yoshihiko nodded and explained.

"Into the jungle. That is the only place to hide. If we are to fight well, we must first build up experience. Also, the monsters will drop weapons. We need to gather equipment too. As that L'Isle-Adam named Korone said, there is someone lurking in here who is ignoring the rules. We cannot do anything without looking into that, and we cannot walk freely throughout the game world without experience and items."

With that said, Yoshihiko headed into the jungle.

Junko hesitated.

"Eh? Wait..."

"What is it?"

"B-but this will mean the two of us are alone together."

"That cannot be helped, so how about we work together? Also, I feel something similar to respect when it comes to you. Do not worry."

Yoshihiko gave a carefree smile.

"R-right. That is right. Yes. Understood. You are right."

Junko was confused.

—Being carefree is fine and all... But why does he not seem to realize we will be a guy and girl alone together? Is it because this is a game? Or...

Junko of course did not know that Yoshihiko was actually Yoshie.

—Ahh! This is no time to be nervous. At least he seems to be a gentleman.

Junko followed after Yoshihiko.

Junko hunted under Yoshihiko's instruction until sunset.

"Hoh!"

She cut down a Giant Bat with the short sword Yoshihiko had lent her. The Giant Bat let out a high-pitched shriek as it died. Its body would eventually disappear, but the fact that its body remained at all proved it was a monster of this world rather than a player. And occasionally, an item would appear next to a monster's dead body.

"A knife. I earned this myself. You can have your short sword back."

Junko held the knife in a backhand grip and swung it.

"And I am more used to this kind of weapon."

"You are a ninja, after all. A Suhara-style Japanese sword would be best, though. Anyway, defeat a few more to level up high enough to use scrolls."

Under Yoshihiko's instructions, Junko gained even more levels.

Finally, night came.

"A day in the game is equivalent to about an hour in reality," explained Yoshihiko as he set up the camp.

He threw what looked like a small model, and a tent and campfire appeared in the jungle clearing.

"That is convenient."

Impressed, Junko sat next to the fire.

"By the way, what will we do tomorrow other than raise our levels further?"

Yoshihiko opened a screen, displayed a map, and pointed at the center.

"There is a powerful weapon here. The monster guarding it is powerful, but there is a trick that allows you to defeat it even at low levels. We should try to-... Huh?"

"What is it?"

Yoshihiko's expression was quite serious. He shook his head as if to say something was wrong.

"The game's objective has changed. It says to search for the holy grail."

"Can the game be changed like that?"

"Of course it can. However, not even I can do it while inside here. Only someone outside the game can do it. But I had it protected. And if that isn't it...it must be related to the uncertain element."

Yoshihiko brought a hand to his chin as he thought.

"We just have to be careful, right? There is no need to worry that much. And there is no sign of an accident having occurred," said Junko to cheer him up.

"Your truly dignified mindset is most encouraging. I am glad you are the one I got to know so well," said Yoshihiko in a gentle voice.

"Wha-...? That is going too far."

Junko looked away.

"No, I mean it. I am not very good at opening up to others. I always try to be honest, but I do not have many friends."

"I am not sure how to respond to that. ...But I understand. We have no choice but to work together for now, so I will try to listen to what you say," replied Junko embarrassedly to Yoshihiko's straightforward words.

"That is good to hear. I originally created this technology in the hopes of providing true communication in this virtual alternate dimension."

"True communication?"

"Yes. Pure communication. With a space in which one is freed from the physical body, I thought people could live more happily."

"Sorry, but I am not too good with difficult concepts like this."

Junko shook her head with a bitter smile.

Yoshihiko smiled sadly.

"I was mostly just complaining. Sorry for bringing up such a boring topic. Let's get to sleep."

Yoshihiko moved from the fire and opened the tent.

"Wait..."

Junko blushed and shook her hands.

"Get to sleep? In the one tent?"

Yoshihiko tilted his head slightly.

"Is that a problem?"

"Y-you idiot! Of course it is!"

Junko's voice grew a bit louder.

Yoshihiko tilted his head even further.

"Well, I suppose you're right. It would be a bit cramped. ...Oh!" He clapped his hands together. "There is a camp in your equipment, too."

"Eh?"

Junko dug through her pocket. There was indeed a model tent like the one Yoshihiko had thrown. Throwing it would likely create a campfire as well.

—What was he thinking?

An unpleasant uneasiness filled Junko's chest.

"I am going to sleep."

Junko created her tent and climbed inside. While wrapped in the sleeping bag inside, she dully looked up at the top of the tent.

—Ahh, I just can't settle down. What is this feeling? Oh, I know. This is a lot like the feeling he gives me.

Akuto's face appeared in Junko's mind. She rolled over with the sleeping bag and curled up.

—Come to think of it, they are kind of similar. Do I have a weakness for that type?

Junko ended up worrying over that all night.

—I'm not really the type to get worried when I cross a perilous bridge.

2V gave a self-derisive laugh.

She was the type that did not cross the perilous bridge in the first place. That had gone beyond being a policy and was now a subconscious habit. Any dangerous actions would be handled by the dolls and the dolls would self-destruct if any information was about to leak out. She even had dolls purchase the dolls and primarily used common models. It was all to ensure it could not be traced back to her.

But she was now touching the terminal a bit fearfully.

2V had no choice but to hack in through top level security. And to do that, she was forced to use her fixed mana waves. In other words, she had to identify herself as the real 2V. Basically, she was trying to reach the depths of the god by proving she was 2V of CIMO 8.

—CIMO 8 authority isn't enough to reach the high priest level. From there on, I have to hack.

She had a reason to dive down to that deep level.

"I doubt even the high priest has noticed that entry. After all, it looks like unimportant data. But in truth..."

2V hurriedly touched the mana screen while muttering to herself.

Her true form was a sickly-looking girl. Her slender arms and legs were wrapped in simple white clothes and she did nothing but operate terminals in a dimly lit room filled with dolls. She was filled with a certain sort of beauty.

—I've never taken a truly serious action before. It's almost laughable that I'm typing on a terminal like some kind of geek. My hands hurt and my eyes hurt. I never thought I would get lost in something like this.

Text scrolled by on the mana screen before 2V's eyes. She had arrived at the deepest depths of the god Megis.

"This area is only accessed when the high priest rewrites the program," muttered 2V.

<High priest ID confirmed. Please select a command.>

2V heard the voice of the archbishop...that is, the L'Isle-Adam that

conveyed the words of Megis. It seemed she had fooled the system splendidly.

"I want to view the data on the sealed demon king."

<Understood. The data is read only. It will be automatically erased from your terminal.>

"I only need to see it once."

2V's eyes frantically followed the data scrolling across the mana screen. She memorized it all.

And after storing it all in her brain after a single read through, she immediately severed the connection and did her best to erase all trace of her actions.

After finishing that, she finally burst out laughing as if she could not hold it back.

"Heh heh heh... Hee hee... Ha ha ha! I never thought it went this far. This is great. Everything I hoped for is here. I never once thought I would come across such good fortune. And it was so easy. It's almost disappointingly easy."

2V's voice started out calm but grew more and more excited.

As her sickly cheeks grew disturbingly pink, 2V opened another mana

screen and broke through the security Yoshie had set up.

"But this will work. She's inside, so I can cross this perilous bridge as many times as necessary. Heh. I'm beginning to understand why normal people spend all day enjoying themselves at this age. I never knew such worthless things could be so exciting. It's hard to resist."

2V grinned as she altered the program and set up a trap.

"The original demon king. That existence was created to destroy the system of the world at the time, but it will work well enough even now!"

When Hiroshi realized where Lily had taken him, he could not help but gulp. They had arrived at the temple of Megis.

There were exceptions, but normal people were usually allowed as far as the main hall of the temples. Entertainment facilities would be built inside and a shopping center was often built around them.

However, Lily brought him to an area normal people were not allowed. This was where the clerks and priests worked.

"Sh-should we really be in here?" asked Hiroshi nervously.

"It isn't a problem. I made an appointment to speak about some secrets."

"Oh, that's good."

"Not that I gave them a chance to say no," added Lily quietly.

"W-wait! What do you mean by that!?"

Hiroshi panicked, but Lily's expression remained unconcerned.

"I sent an email saying I was coming so he needs to stay in his office."

"That's all?"

"What more is needed?"

"Well, I suppose that's fine. But with who?"

"The high priest."

"Wah! Please give me a break!"

"Why do we need to fear someone just because they have an important position?"

Lily laughed, but there were two guards standing before the door to the special areas on the upper floors.

"You need permission to pass through here," said one of the guards.

"Ee! S-sorry..."

Hiroshi apologized, but Lily calmly walked over and looked up at them with a grin.

"I'm Shiraishi's daughter."

"The priest's?"

The guards looked surprised at Lily's self-introduction, but quickly returned to the expressionless look of a guard. One of the pointed to the right.

"Even Priest Shiraishi's daughter needs permission. At the very least, you need a temporary guest pass."

"It doesn't really matter," said Lily bluntly.

She stroked her right fist with her left hand and grinned.

The two guards moved and tension filled the atmosphere.

However, a new voice cut in.

"It's fine. Let them through."

That low, kind voice came from beyond the door.

"High priest..."

The guards saluted and stiffened.

Kita Hidehiko appeared. The man had gray mixed in with his hair and looked solidly honest. But if one looked, one could see something frightening in his eyes. That self-consciously strong light resembled madness.

"Thank you for understanding."

Lily bowed in greeting. As a girl, it was not required that she took off her hat, but not removing that large, stylish hat and her earlier attitude made it seem she was mocking him.

But Hidehiko let Lily and Hiroshi through.

And after walking down the passageway far enough that the guards could not hear, he opened his mouth.



"I have heard about my daughter's mistake. I suppose it should not surprise me that Shiraishi's daughter would try to threaten me using that."

"I don't want to talk about family. That father of mine will still accept if

you challenge him to a fight.”

“Fathers worry about their daughters. I doubt you would understand at your age, though.”

“Sorry, but I’m not old enough to worry about having an heir.”

Hiroshi had been doing nothing but sweat as he listened to the way Lily spoke. Hidehiko was still smiling, but Hiroshi did not know how long that would last.

Once they entered the high priest’s office, Hidehiko circled to the opposite side of the desk, urged them to sit, and then sat himself. He opened a mana screen and asked Lily to speak.

“The Birdcage Project.”

Lily spoke only that one phrase.

But it was enough to make Hidehiko’s eyebrows twitch.

“Are you trying to say Yoshie is involved in that?”

“Yes. And a video game she wrote is involved as well. I couldn’t tell you how that happened, though.”

Lily slid a mana screen of her own toward Hidehiko. It contained the

information she had and the conjectures she had made based on it.

The Birdcage Project was a plan meant to seal the demon king in the virtual alternate dimension.

That virtual alternate dimension was used to protect the god Megis.

And the academy had ended up involved in it all.

"I personally had Yoshie-san tracked. I found no definitive proof, but I have no doubt she took part in this. However, the fact that she is inside that game is proof enough."

Lily displayed footage of the game on the screen. It displayed Yoshihiko's data.

"A little bit of investigation should prove that Yoshihiko-san is the same person as Yoshie-san. We only need to check the temple's communication data. You should be able to do that here," said Lily.

"That is not necessary," said Hidehiko with a shake of the head. "I already knew all this to a certain extent."

"To a certain extent?"

"I knew my daughter was performing research online."

"Did you know she was participating in this project?"

"Yes. But this is the first I have heard of the academy being involved. Since you came here to inform me of this, I assume you want to make some kind of deal."

Hidehiko must have already resigned himself to this or had some other idea because all expression vanished from his face.

Lily grinned.

"I want information on the person behind this plan. With that, we can handle everything being done to the academy."

"You mean codename 2V? Understood. I will do what I can."

"That was easy. It makes me suspect you have some ulterior motive here."

"I am not plotting anything. I did not like this plan from the beginning. That is all. ...At any rate, look at this."

Hidehiko slid a mana screen toward Lily. It displayed the log of the terminal Yoshie used, but that terminal was currently in use.

"The terminal is in use!?"

Lily gulped.

"Yoshie is inside that game, so this cannot be her. The connection is coming from a different location as well. It is being hacked," said Hidehiko.

"That means... This is 2V!"

Lily's expression changed.

When Hidehiko saw that look, he nodded toward her.

"In all likelihood, yes. This is for the sake of my daughter, so I will uphold my end of the bargain. Please tell me how to contact you. I will send you whatever information I find. You want to head to the location of this connection, don't you?"

"Thanks!"

Lily bowed and ran out of the high priest's office.

Junko continued leveling up the following day.

"I think I have gotten the hang of this."

Junko's weapon was now a Japanese sword and Yoshihiko had gained a

few levels despite having started out at a higher level. They were now able to defeat fairly powerful monsters when working together.

"We should be fine heading to the center of the map like this," said Yoshihiko after they defeated several Bugbears.

"You said there is a powerful weapon there, right?"

"Yes. It is a sword that helps defeat the demon king. It is the most powerful weapon in the game."

"Wouldn't everyone be after it then?"

"The monster protecting it is powerful, so it is difficult to defeat without knowing the trick. Unfortunately, I was unable to tell everyone what that is before they scattered."

"With our students, that would have led to fighting over who got the sword," said Junko.

Yoshihiko laughed.

"Ha ha ha. I'm not sure whether I should be sad people fight even in a game or if I should be glad they can safely enjoy fighting this way."

"I was taught that controlling when you fight is part of being a warrior."

Junko intended that as a casual comment, but Yoshihiko seemed quite impressed.

"I see. I need to learn the teachings of other sects as well. That is a view worth listening to. Or perhaps it is your personal ideas which are wonderful."

"S-stop saying that kind of thing with a straight face..."

Junko tried to pass it off as a joke, but she still blushed and looked away.

It was only the second day, but they had already reached the point of being able to talk naturally.

"I have a straight face because I mean it."

"E-enough of that. That weapon's location is more important."

Yoshihiko pointed forward.

"To be honest, we are already headed there. That is the location right there."

A rocky mountain rose up ahead of them.

"So it is at the peak?"

Junko looked up at the mountain.

Once they arrived at the foot of the mountain, a path became visible. Some of the higher parts of the path seemed to require crossing chains driven into the rock.

"So we will be attacked by a powerful monster on that path? That sounds difficult," muttered Junko.

"It will be fine," said Yoshihiko. "There is a volcanic crater at the peak and there is another narrow path there. If we can escape along it, the monster will get stuck in the narrowest portion. That's how we'll do it."

"I see. So it is a secret trick."

Junko began up the narrow path.

The mountain path was dangerous and there was almost no footing as they approached the peak, but Junko had no problem with heights. She even led Yoshihiko along as he was having trouble.

"The path around the crater forms a ring and one portion of that ring is narrower than the rest. That's the spot."

Yoshihiko pointed at a certain spot once they were able to see the several hundred meter path circling the crater. The path was only barely wide enough for one person to pass through.

"There is a sword in the crater. Once we walk down the path inside, we will encounter the guardian monster."

Junko nodded at Yoshihiko's explanation.

"And we will return to the path around the crater and guide it to that narrow spot?"

"Yes. We will flee to the left. If you do not mess up there, you will be fine," assured Yoshihiko.

And so they walked down the path into the crater.

After heading down several dozen meters, they arrived at the edge of a lake of lava.

"With all this heat, how are we supposed to enter the lava? And I do not see a sword anywhere," said Junko as she looked at the red lava at her feet.

Yoshihiko urged her to prepare to run.

"Once the guardian monster is defeated, the lava disappears. Here it comes."

Just as he finished speaking, the center of the lava lake swelled up as if a fountain had been turned on. That fountain of molten rock gained even

more momentum and reached a height of over ten meters while sending a spray of lava everywhere.

"Something is rising up from the below the lava!"

"That is Ifrit. It's going to chase us."

Yoshihiko began running and Junko followed.

She looked over her shoulder and glimpsed a ten meter or greater humanoid shape within the lava. As that scorched humanoid thing walked through the lava, the lava gathered around it and blew fire everywhere.

"I know this is game, but that is a terrifying sight," said Junko in admiration.

It was a ten-meter-plus flame Jinn. It had an amazing intensity.

Ifrit slowly approached Junko and Yoshihiko. However, its large steps meant it was quickly approaching Junko's back even though she was running.

"Hurry," said Yoshihiko calmly as he let Junko go on ahead. Their speed was equal to Ifrit's while climbing the slope, but they would be able to gain a lead on Ifrit on the flat path around the crater.

Junko maintained her distance with Ifrit and entered that path. She

turned ninety degrees and continued to run.

However...

"That's the wrong way! I said to turn left!" cried Yoshihiko.

"Eh?"

Junko stopped running. She turned around to find Yoshihiko a short distance away. Also, Ifrit was moving in between the two of them.

"Oh, no!"

Junko realized she had mistaken his meaning when he said to turn to the "left". Junko could be careless even when she appeared to do everything precisely.

And Ifrit turned toward Junko and began moving forward.

"Wah!"

Junko had no choice but to run forward.

"No, you can't run that way. The path is too rough to run properly. It will catch up to you," pointed out Yoshihiko from behind Ifrit, but she had no other option.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" asked Junko frantically.

"I will attack from behind, but Ifrit is made to continually pursue its target. You will have to fight somehow or another," said Yoshihiko while remaining extremely calm given the situation.

"S-somehow or another?"

Junko turned around, leaped toward Ifrit as it approached, and struck it in the chest with her Japanese sword.

"I hit it!"

She jumped back and looked up to check the result of her attack.

"What!?"

The attack had not been enough to stop Ifrit's advance. That giant form wrapped in lava and flames continued forward as if nothing had happened.

"It's slow so it cannot avoid attacks very well, but it has a lot of stamina. Also..."

Before Yoshihiko could continue, Ifrit spread its arms, stuck out its chest, and roared toward the heavens. And as it roared, countless granular bulges appeared on its chest.

"What?" asked Junko in confusion.

"It can fire countless bullets as an attack. Those are difficult to avoid."

By the time Yoshihiko said that, countless flaming stones were already raining down around Junko.

"Waaaaah!"

Junko managed to jump back and forth avoiding the falling stones, but there were simply too many of them.

"Wait.... How long...is this going to last!?"

She let out a scream.

One of the flaming stones had struck her.

She was knocked to the side, another one hit her, and she was slammed to the ground. And then the shower of flaming stones finally let up.

"Not good."

Yoshihiko used recovery magic.

Junko immediately stood up, but the situation had not improved.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

Yoshihiko responded calmly once more.

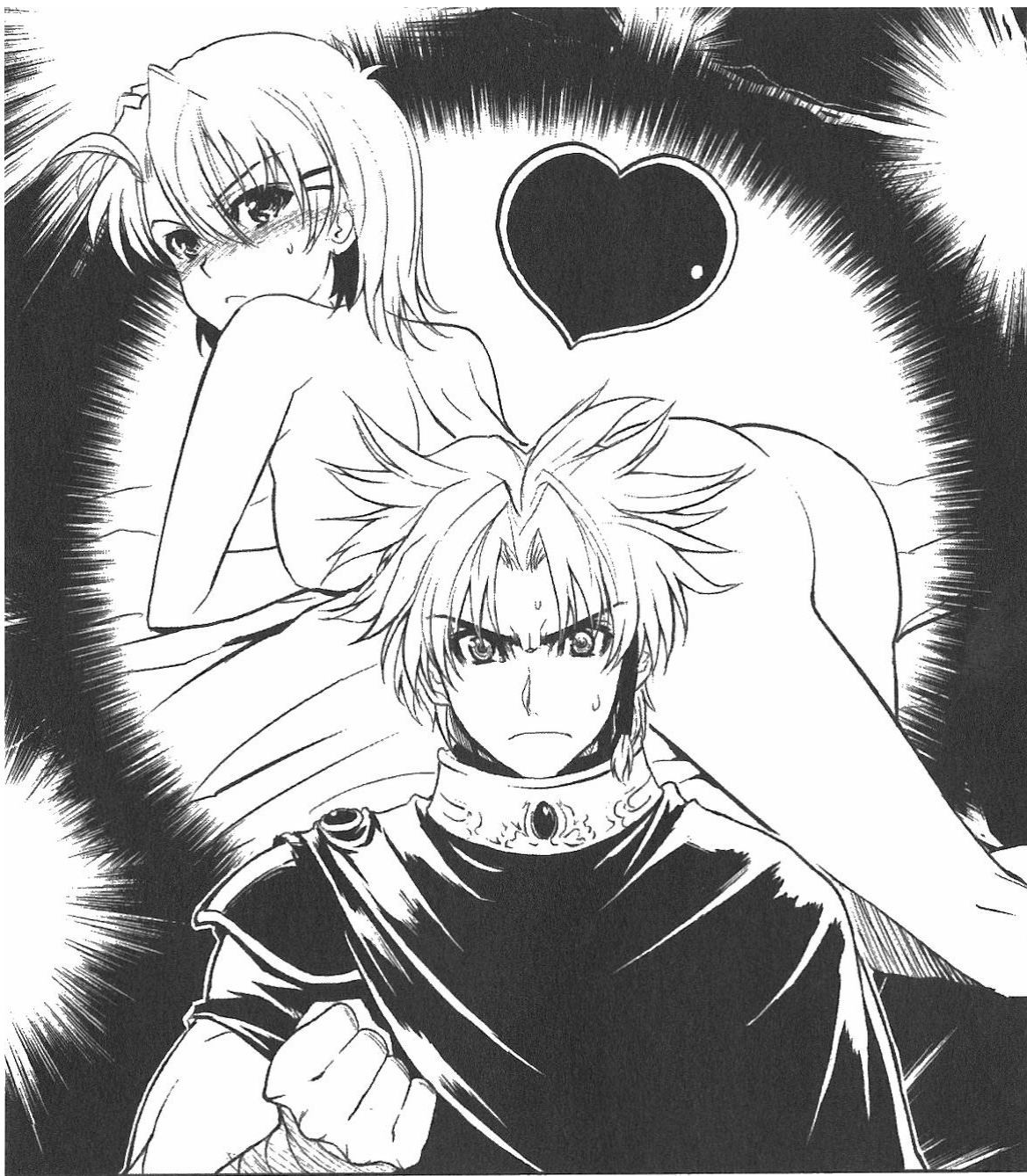
"I will continue to attack it from behind, but you will have to outlast five of those attacks before I can defeat Ifrit. Also, if you are not fully healed, being hit once will kill you. The problem is I can only use my recovery magic three more times."

"Thanks for the analysis. So basically, I just need to keep dodging?"

"Exactly. But this is not an issue of your reflexes. This is a serious issue on the game side of things. If you do not have the proper stats, you will be hit by the stones no matter how quick your reflexes."

"You mean there is nothing I can do?"

Junko began to panic.



Ifrit was already preparing to fire the flaming stones again.

“No! There is one way you can do this!” announced Yoshihiko as if to say everything would be all right.

"What is that?" asked Junko hopefully.

However...

"Take off your clothes! All of them!"

"What...?"

"Take off your clothes. Strip naked!" repeated Yoshihiko.

"Wait... Don't you realize the situation here!?" shouted Junko.

However, Yoshihiko nodded with a serious expression.

"Take off your clothes. Please listen to me!"

"D-do you have any idea what you-...bgh!"

She was unable to say "are saying?" The next shower of flaming stones was fired. It struck Junko and she collapsed to the ground.

"You need to take off your clothes. You can't even keep your underwear on," said Yoshihiko as he used recovery magic.

"Wh-what kind of nonsense is this?" protested Junko as she got up after being healed.

However, she received a serious and absolutely unavoidable response.

"A ninja gains greater evasion the more clothes they remove. It triples when they're naked!"

"Liar!" shouted Junko.

But Yoshihiko did not falter.

"I am merely saying this is more efficient. Your level is high enough that doing that will let you evade while I defeat Ifrit!"

Yoshihiko – that is, Yoshie – was the type to push aside her emotions and focus on efficiency. And in this case, she had completely forgotten that Junko saw her as a guy. She assumed Junko's refusal to strip was due to her being extremely shy. She felt it was ridiculous to choose defeat just because you were embarrassed. That was why the words Yoshihiko shouted seemed so ridiculous to Junko.

"Take off your clothes! Don't be embarrassed! No one is watching but me! And if you do find it embarrassing, at least start by taking off some of your clothes! If you do that, you will be able to feel the freedom it gives you!"

"Are you from some kind of nudist colony!?" complained Junko, but a stone struck her in the head immediately afterwards. "Gah!"

"I can only heal you one more time!"

"Uuh... I just...I just have to strip, right!? At least face the other way!" shouted Junko in despair after being healed and standing up.

But her determination received an inelegant response.

"If I face the other way, I cannot attack Ifrit!"

"Then I'm only taking off one piece of clothing!"

As she complained, Junko placed a hand on her clothes and quickly removed a piece. Chainmail was revealed below.

"If you do not remove the chainmail, I won't do anything!"

"S-stop commenting on it!"

Having gone this far, Junko used the momentum of removing that one piece to remove the chainmail as well. She now wore nothing but a sarashi on her upper body.

"Th-that's enough, right!? Huh...?"

Junko was confused. She stopped complaining because she felt the freedom of her body suddenly rise dramatically.

"What is this...!?"

It had not tripled, but she was now able to avoid the next shower of flaming stones when she focused. She also felt like the speed of her falls had grown slower.

"That's good. But to be sure, you should strip completely naked."

"Enough! I could evade well enough, so this is fine!" shouted Junko.

Yoshihiko shook his head.

"But when Ifrit dies, it sends even more stones shooting down in every direction!"

And precisely that happened soon thereafter.

Ifrit's body shrank down, but only so it could fire out even more flaming stones. Those stones rained down with such density that they seemed to fill the sky.

"You idiooooootttttt!"

As she cried, Junko reached for her skirt.

And...

Ifrit vanished.

But behind where it had been, Junko was crouched down trying to cover her nudity with her hands.

"Uuh... Such humiliation."

Yoshihiko walked over and handed her her clothes.

"Sorry about that. You did well despite being so embarrassed."

"You idiot! Do you not know how to have a bit of delicacy!?" shouted Junko as she grabbed her clothes.

Yoshihiko was shocked by this reaction and stood perfectly still.

"S-sorry. I seem to not understand some of the subtleties of people's feelings. Um... Could you forgive me? I focused too much on acting efficiently in the game."

Junko was confused by how much of a reaction Yoshihiko gave and how honestly he apologized. She quickly fell to resignation.

—Getting angry is not going to help. He is just that kind of person.

"N-next time, try to think about how the other person will feel."

Junko had Yoshihiko look away and then she dressed herself.

"I really am sorry. This might also be why I got the academy caught up in all this."

Yoshihiko spoke his regrets while facing away.

"I understand, so do not worry about it too much," said Junko once she was fully dressed.

Yoshihiko shook his head.

"I am simply reflecting on myself. I researched the virtual alternate dimension because I was focusing on direct communication with other people, so I should be worried if I do not understand how other people feel. Or perhaps it is because I do not understand how they feel that I was researching the virtual alternate dimension. Maybe I wanted to be able to truly understand others." Yoshihiko turned around and smiled at Junko. "Someday I will become the kind of person you can approve of. I hope we can deepen our relationship when that time comes."

"Wha-...?"

Junko blushed and stood stock still.

—D-did he just confess to me?

"Wh-what are you saying?"

When Yoshihiko saw how confused Junko was, he shook his head regrettably.

"I still have a long way to go."

"N-no, you... wait. What am I saying? That is not what I meant. It's just, um...well..."

Junko grew flustered, but Yoshihiko began walking while paying her no heed.

This felt anticlimactic to Junko.

—It would be weird for me to ask him what he meant by that. Anyway, this is no time to be worrying about this.

While Junko's mind was filled with that, Yoshihiko pointed ahead toward the path leading into the crater. The lava lake was gone, exposing the black rock below.

"With Ifrit gone, the lava disappears, too," explained Yoshihiko before telling Junko to look at the center.

"There is a sword."

Junko noticed a single sword stabbing into the center of the crater.

"Let's go."

Yoshihiko climbed down into the crater.

Junko followed, but stopped after a bit.

"Wait. I sense a presence."

"A presence?"

Yoshihiko turned around and Junko nodded.

"Someone is here. Maybe a student followed us."

"That would be good. Once we have the sword, I intended to head to the demon king's..."

Yoshihiko trailed off because a figure appeared on the path leading to the crater.

A footstep on the stone was followed by the sound of something being dragged. The figure that appeared was that of a short girl.

"Who is that? I do not recognize her. She is not from my class."

Junko took a defensive stance.

The short girl bent over in response.

She looked unbalanced. This was not because there was anything wrong with her body. She looked odd because she was only about 120 centimeters tall yet she wore a nearly 180 centimeter sword on her back. Her hair was tied in a ponytail so long that it skimmed across the ground which added to the strange impression she gave.

But there was nothing noticeably wrong with her face or body. In fact, they were both too perfect. Her face had a doll-like beauty to it. Her body was well proportioned and one could easily imagine that her arms and legs could pull off actions with machine-like agility.

"No matter your identity, you must not be permitted into the sealed land."

The girl's voice was somehow youthful, but the bold and antiquated manner of speaking made her all the more unbalanced.

"The sealed land? Then are you protecting this place?" asked Junko.

"Indeed. I have long protected this land," replied a bold voice.

"A guardian.... But we defeated Ifrit. Is she a new guardian?"

Junko turned around to ask Yoshihiko.

He shook his head.

"The game has no such character."

"Are...you sure?"

Junko sounded nervous. She had heard the game might change, but she guessed the appearance of a character with a will of its own was a very strange occurrence.

"Wait. But that sounded like what a character from a game would say. And you could call this a sealed land, right?"

Yoshihiko had to admit she was right about that, but he shook his head all the same.

"True, but that isn't it. I am certain there is no character like this in the game. This is dangerous."

"Then is she the uncertain element?"

"It would seem so," said Yoshihiko with a tense expression.

However, the short girl did not seem to like them speaking in private.

"I am not fond of private discussions! Since it has come to this..."

The short girl placed a hand on the sword on her back.

Junko prepared herself, but she realized the girl was too short to draw a sword that long.

Her arm would naturally not reach any further than an arm's length up from her shoulder, but the blade was taller than she was tall.

The short girl stretched her arm up as far as it would go while gripping the sword's hilt. The sword slid a bit from its scabbard, but it was still solidly held within.

"You should have known that would happen..."

Junko could not believe what she was seeing as the short girl quickly realized what she "should have known would happen".

"My name is Keisu. I have nothing against you, but my duty requires that I cut you down!"

The short girl naming herself Keisu pushed the sword down in its scabbard and then drew it again. Except she practically threw the sword this time. As she drew it, she let go of the hilt, letting the sword slide from its scabbard and fly into the air.

"Ahh!"

Junko looked up as the bare blade soared through the sky. With the empty scabbard on her back, Keisu jumped into the air after it. She skillfully grabbed the sword in midair, balled herself up, and rotated with her long hair fluttering about. Keisu became a dangerous ball with a blade growing from it as she launched toward Junko.

"Watch out!"

Yoshihiko smoothly moved in front of Junko. He drew his sword and blocked Keisu's sword as she fell from the air with tremendous force.

A metallic noise rang out as if two pieces of heavy machinery had struck each other. Keisu's tremendous blow knocked Yoshihiko backwards.

"Yoshihiko!" called Junko reflexively.

But even as he was knocked away, Yoshihiko did not lose his balance.

"Do not worry. I can handle this much."

Yoshihiko smiled at Junko.

"What!? Is this any time to try to act cool!?" shouted Junko.

"This is not part of the game, so I cannot say what will happen. It is my responsibility to handle it."

Yoshihiko would not back down.

“Cease speaking such nonsense! Do not mock me like this!”

Keisu once more jumped around like a ball while swinging her sword around. Either the sword was quite heavy or Keisu was quite light because she was completely swung around by the sword. But this must have been her style of fighting because every strike was quite accurate. And while she could only send one attack at a time, she continually rotated to send an endless stream of attacks.

If they had not been in that vast stony crater, Yoshihiko would have been easily driven into a corner. However, he was still unable to do anything but endure Keisu’s attacks.

“Yoshihiko!”

Junko tried to find an opening to attack Keisu, but the area all around the short girl constantly had the white blade slicing through it.

“You said you are protecting this land, but what is it you are protecting!?” asked Yoshihiko while receiving the attacks.

Keisu replied surprisingly honestly.

“What it is I protect is a secret, but that which is protected is of course a secret!”

Answering honestly was fine, but Keisu may not have been very smart.

"Are you protecting that sword?"

"No! My protection is needed to ensure the demon king does not acquire the holy grail! ...Wait. I feel like I just gave away the secret..."

Keisu tilted her head.

"Wait. In that case, we are not trying to get in your way!" said Yoshihiko, but Keisu did not stop attacking.

"Even so, this is my duty. I cannot stop attacking until I lose!"

"Then you will stop attacking if you lose?"

"A warrior does not go back on her word! In fact, losing means death! Of course I will stop."

"In that case..."

Yoshihiko stuck his sword out forwards and stopped moving.

"You are wide open!"

Keisu did not overlook that instant and she attacked.

"Yoshihiko!" shouted Junko when she saw it.

Keisu's sword flew in an arc that would certainly sever Yoshihiko's head.

She was short, but she swiftly passed by Yoshihiko's side as he stood still. Her sword swept right through his neck.

"Ee!"

Junko let out a short shriek. She had known Yoshihiko had no real knowledge of swordplay. He had been stronger than Junko in this virtual alternate dimension, but only because it was a game. He had been able to fight because he knew the rules so thoroughly. When it came down to swordplay against an existence from outside the game, it was readily apparent he would lose. Keisu was skilled enough to give even Junko trouble in the real world.

As Yoshihiko stood perfectly still, he began to disappear. When one died in the game, they turned to dust. However, his image blurred in a way Junko had not seen before. While Yoshihiko stood as still as a statue, the area around him blurred as if a mosaic had been placed over it.

"Don't tell me he really is..."

She could not bear to say the word "dead".

But Keisu seemed perfectly convinced of her victory.

"To die in battle is an honor for a warrior. There is nothing to grieve over."

Keisu turned toward Junko and raised her sword.

Junko had no time to be lost in sentimentality. Yoshihiko was disappearing with his sword still pointed forward. Ensuring her own survival came before checking on his survival.

"Come at me!"

Keisu prepared to swing her sword around as before. She first swung the large sword upwards.

However...

Keisu's body floated up into the air. She had not jumped. She was hanging down from the sword.

"Wh-what are you doing!? No, who is this!?"

Keisu flailed around while hanging down from the sword's hilt. When she looked over her shoulder, a look of shock appeared on her face.

"How!?"

"Ahh!" cried Junko in surprise.

The one holding the sword up between gauntleted hands was Yoshihiko. And yet the disappearing image of him still existed a short distance away.

"I knew I would never win in a straight fight, so I took advantage of a graphical bug," said Yoshihiko.

"A bug!? What do you mean a bug!?"

Keisu continued to struggle, but Yoshihiko swung the sword around, her hands slipped from the hilt, and she flew through the air.

"Whaaat!?"

Keisu fell to the ground and rolled for a bit.

"A bug?" asked Junko as she walked over to Yoshihiko.

Yoshihiko pointed at the image of him still standing still with his sword sticking out.

He nodded.

"When you take a certain action, a frozen image remains behind. After a

moment, you will appear nearby, but the frozen image will remain for a while."

"You idiot... Do not scare me like that," said Junko in a pouting voice.

They then heard a loud voice.

"I have lost! I will commit seppuku, so watch closely!"

Keisu sat down and opened the front of her kimono.

"H-hey, wait a second! Do not be so hasty!"

Junko tried to stop her, but Keisu was stubborn.

"Do not stop me! This is a warrior's death."

Keisu swung up her right hand and placed her left hand on her stomach.

And...

"Sorry, but could you hand me my sword?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Junko in shock.

"I insist on using full-sized swords, so I do not grapple and I do not carry a short sword. Please give me my sword."

Keisu bowed toward Junko.

"That kind of Bushido is not very popular anymore."

"I adhere to the old customs."

"Then at least carry a short sword to commit suicide with."

"I have never committed suicide before, so it never came up."

"Everyone who commits suicide is doing it for the first time! How exactly do you adhere to the old customs!?"

"Fine. Forget the old customs," said Keisu.

It was becoming clear that it was due to Keisu's personality that the conversation was growing tedious. Either he could not stand just watching on or he was just an odd person because Yoshihiko gave her some help.

"In that case, I will take on your life. Please help us."

"Help you?"

Keisu stood up.

"You only need to tell us who you are," replied Yoshihiko.

Keisu folded her arms.

"That is all?"

"Yes."

"I already stated my name: Keisu. I was sealed in here to ensure the demon king does not acquire the holy grail."

"We know that already. Where did you come from?"

"I was born to be here. That is all I know," answered Keisu.

It seemed she did not know everything either.

"But the demon king is Sai Akuto. Well, he is the demon king in the game, so would it be bad if he acquired the holy grail because we would lose the game?" Junko asked Yoshihiko.

He tilted his head.

"I don't know. However, the holy grail was not in the game originally. That means it might be dangerous if he acquires it," said Yoshihiko as he

exchanged a glance with Junko.

"What are you talking about? The demon king's power was sealed within the holy grail. The demon king could not be defeated, so his power was sealed," said Keisu.

"So...the story has changed? Wait, could she be talking about reality?" muttered Junko without thinking. She then turned nervously toward Yoshihiko. "You may not be aware, but we have been involved in a fair bit of trouble related to the demon king. If she is talking about the real demon king, this could be a conspiracy much larger than a mere game."

The look on Yoshihiko's face completely changed.

"Then... What should we do?"

"For now, we need to tell Akuto about this holy grail. We should probably bring her with us, too," said Junko while looking at Keisu.

Yoshihiko nodded.

"Can you come with us?"

He held her sword out toward her and she took it while kneeling before him.

"I dedicate my life to you."

"Sorry. I don't really understand the situation, but it seems there is something we must do. I'm a bit scared because I've never felt this way before, but let's go meet him. Then I have to return to reality and begin the true battle," said Yoshihiko.

He was not speaking in his usual affected tone of voice, so Junko felt she was finally seeing his true self. He was almost certainly someone not used to fighting.

"I will help too. Do not worry."

Junko smiled toward Yoshihiko.

He smiled back and then they began walking toward the center of the crater with Keisu following.

There was a sword there.

That sword that could defeat the demon king was stabbed into a pedestal.

It was a two-handed sword with a jewel embedded on the bottom of the blade and a beautiful woman carved into the hilt. It did not look like a very practical sword outside of a game.

"This is Evil Slayer. It is the strongest sword in the game."

Yoshihiko grabbed the hilt in both hands and pulled. The sword slid

out.

"Oh," said Junko without thinking.

This was because the ground began shaking as soon as he pulled the sword out.

"This was not part of the game," said Yoshihiko as he turned toward Junko.

"Then this is new as well?"

"The demon king has likely begun to move," said Keisu.

"Eh?" said Junko in surprise.

Akuto had clearly awoken within the game world quite a while ago.

However, Keisu gave the following explanation:

"The demon king was sealed in two ways. I do not know where since the appearance of the world has changed, but the demon king himself was sealed and his power was sealed in the holy grail. I do not know the demon king's whereabouts, but I do know he has awoken."

"What...? That would mean there are two demon kings," said Yoshihiko as the shaking of the earth intensified.

The black rock of the crater split. A crack 100 meters long extended from the sword's pedestal and toward them.

"Run!" shouted Yoshihiko as he pointed toward the path they had arrived on.

The three of them ran for that path.

As they did, the crack extended in the opposite direction and the rock around it began to crumble downwards.

With a great roar, a large hole appeared in the volcanic crater.

"Is it going to erupt?" asked Junko.

Once they climbed the path and arrived at the path circling the crater, they turned around and saw a shocking sight.

"Ahh!" shouted Yoshihiko.

"What is this? I have never seen this before!" cried Keisu.

The crack had already grown to a giant hole. The hole was a few hundred meters across and true darkness could be seen within. Something gigantic slowly appeared from that darkness.

It felt as if the pressure of the air had changed. This was because that gigantic being was covering the sky.

It looked like a gigantic octopus. Its skin was similar to mucous membranes and its tentacles lifted its bag-like body into the sky. It also seemed to have the body of a four-legged beast in addition to the tentacles. This monster looked like a fusion between a lion and an octopus. It shook its body as it stood up and it let out a roar toward the sky.

"What is going on?"

After saying that, Yoshihiko stood stock still while at a loss for words.

And that monster began to move. It climbed up the crater and over to the opposite side. It then travelled north with half of its body sticking up above the forest.

North would take it toward the demon king's castle.

"Is that the demon king that Keisu mentioned? Is it searching for the holy grail?" fearfully muttered Junko.

While glancing down at the information sent to her, Lily ran toward the location displayed on the map in her mana screen. Hiroshi followed while almost crying.

"Is 2V up ahead?"

"This will all be wasted effort if not! Then again, I'm going to punch whoever I find here, 2V or not!"

Lily was already worked up.

The map displayed an old apartment building in a disorderly district. It was low income district, so the residents would often not live there for long and they showed little interest in their neighbors. It was an excellent place to hide in.

Even as she arrived at the location, Lily retained some calm. She circled around the apartment building, confirmed there were only two exits, and instructed Hiroshi to enter through one of them and wait on the second floor.

"If anyone tries to get past you, talk to them to stop them. If they try to run, chase after them. You don't have to fight. Just follow them."

After making sure Hiroshi understood, Lily entered the building from the opposite side. The room in question was on the second floor.

She climbed the stairs while sliding her hand along the wall that had occasional damaged areas. She sent the elevator to the top floor and headed on her way. If she broke in right away, 2V could not use the elevator to escape.

"If I break in right away..." she muttered so as not to forget it.

Lily arrived at the door and immediately threw her fist into it with all her strength.

With a tremendous noise, the door bent in and came off its hinges. Lily kicked down the door without worrying about traps. The bent metal struck the floor and an unpleasant noise filled the area. She stepped on the door and inside the room.

The room was filled with dolls. It had no other furnishings.

A girl sat up from where she had been lying in the center of the room.

She was thin and wore shabby clothing. Her long hair was very dry and her cheeks were sunken in.

The girl's appearance caused Lily to hesitate before throwing her punch.

And that instant proved deadly. 2V may have predicted even this.

"I have hostages," said the girl in a hoarse voice.

She had the unnatural intonation of someone who had not physically spoken to another person in a long time.

The girl, 2V, displayed some footage on the mana screen next to her face.

"That game."

Lily took a defensive stance and realized what 2V meant by "hostages".

"That's right. I can erase anyone inside," said 2V.

When Lily realized this girl spoke exactly as 2V had, she cursed her own naïve hesitation.

"I should have realized only a girl would play with dolls. Well, that's hindsight for you. ...But who would have thought it would be such an unhealthy and disheartening girl?"

"You shouldn't talk about people's physical appearance. Weren't you taught not to make fun of how people look? At any rate, don't try anything unless you want the students erased," said 2V quickly.

Lily could immediately tell this girl was not used to having her actual body exposed.

"I hope you aren't petty enough to slaughter the students because someone insulted you. Keh. But it's over for you either way. Whether you have them as hostages or not, it's only a matter of time before the students escape from there. It's only a game, after all. And don't think about killing them. The instant you do, I'll kill you," said Lily while suppressing her anger.

She was able to do so because she felt she had a certain amount of leeway.

However, 2V also seemed to have a certain amount of leeway despite having her true form exposed.

—Does she have some other plan?

Lily glanced searchingly around and 2V must have noticed.

“Then how about we play nice and wait here? That should be fine with both of us,” said 2V lightly.

“Damn you. Why did you hack in despite knowing it risked exposing your location? Did you gain some kind of trump card?”

“A good question. But you would find out eventually if you looked into it, so I’ll save you the trouble: I was checking to see what it was that already existed in the virtual alternate dimension used for this plan.”

Those were shocking words to Lily.

“There was something already in the virtual alternate dimension?”

“Exactly,” said 2V with an unhealthy grin.

“What is it!? That virtual alternate dimension surrounds the god Megis.

Some of the priests of Megis started the Birdcage Project. Did they know about this?" asked Lily rapidly, but 2V waved a hand to stop her.

"The priests didn't know. It happened too long ago for that. In fact, the data was buried in the deepest depths of the system so they could forget. And it has been left there ever since."

"Then... what exactly is inside?" asked Lily.

2V laughed.

"Hee hee. To put it bluntly, it's the very first demon king."

"What...?" Lily gasped. "Something like that exists? You have to be joking. That's just too dangerous!"

"That's why it was put inside the virtual alternate dimension. It seems they had the same idea long ago. And I have woken it up. That original demon king has appeared as a monster in the game. I altered the program to allow that to happen."

"That's what you hacked in to do!?"

"There is a monster in the game that does not fully obey the rules. If someone is killed by it, they will not leave the virtual alternate dimension. They will truly die."

2V laughed.

"Tch! How could you do this!?"

Lily frantically opened a mana screen of her own and accessed the game's message board. The text written there could be seen within the game, too.

"I sealed off any method of communicating with those in the game. You can no longer use the game's message board."

"So those inside have to handle this?"

Lily bit her lip in frustration.

"The conclusion should be reached within a few more days in the game. That is less than an hour here. Let's wait here and watch footage of the game. Which side will win in the end? I can't wait to find out."

2V grinned.

Chapter 4: A Fairly Large Battle

The view from the castle terrace was not bad. The scenery was mostly the jungle and a rocky mountain, but that nature – or images modeled after nature – visible below the blue sky had a way of calming the heart.

Akuto stood on the terrace with a wine glass in one hand.

“Being the final boss of a game is pretty boring.”

“You don’t really notice it while playing the game, though,” replied Keena as she stood next to him eating rice.

The sight of her scooping rice from a bowl using chopsticks did not suit that western castle.

They could not access the outside world, so they could only view the game’s manual and the internal data. After checking through all that and realizing he could not comprehend the program, Akuto had little left to do.

“And we learned the holy grail is deep in the castle,” complained Akuto.

He had found the game’s final objective of the holy grail enshrined in the bottommost dungeon of the castle. Picking it up had done nothing. It seemed to only be the players’ final objective. That meant the game would end when he was defeated and one of the players took it. Akuto did not care if that was the ending reached.

"But who changed the story?" asked Keena.

"All we know is that a lot of different factors are involved. But until we know what those are, we shouldn't try anything. ...By the way, where did you find that rice?"

"It was right there! As soon as I wanted to eat it, it was there in front of me. This castle sure is convenient. It must be filled with invisible maids."

"If there are so many invisible maids, why don't we run into them?"

"Maybe they're fast, so they move out of the way."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of fast invisible maids..."

Akuto smiled bitterly and heard a voice from behind him.

"Demon king, it is I, Demon General Korone. I have come with news."

Akuto turned around to find Korone kneeling.

"Can you please stop putting on that act?"

"No. Fulfilling the game is the key to leaving this world."

"Even so... Anyway, what is it?"

"Two things. First, the program seems to have been altered a bit from outside."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yes, but the virtual alternate dimension is primarily influenced by the wills and actions of those inside. External changes are limited to small things outside of the fundamental factors. For example, increasing the number of enemy characters. But I cannot say what will happen, so be careful when faced with an enemy not in the manual."

The problems just kept coming.

"It would be dangerous if an enemy like that killed you, right?" said Akuto with a nod of understanding.

"Yes. Be careful. As for the other piece of news, while hunting down the remnants, I learned that the enemy is gathering together."

"Gathering together?"

"Yes. It seems they scattered, raised their level, and waited for an opportunity. If the time has come, they will advance to the castle with an army they believe can defeat you."

"That's good to hear. This game will soon come to end," said Akuto in

relief.

"No, we will achieve victory by killing all of them."

"If that's what you want to do, that's fine too. Everyone is going to hate me regardless."

"Then I shall head to the fortress on the path here. ...As you can see, they have begun to move."

Korone pointed beyond the terrace.

Akuto turned around and found a single trail of smoke rising from the jungle.

"Oh, it's smoke," said Keena innocently.

More and more smoke signals began to rise across the landscape.

"A lot of them survived."

"Do not worry. There are fewer than thirty survivors and each commander has no more than ten thousand soldiers. I will borrow your army. I shall surely be victorious with the twenty thousand troops of the demon king army and the geographical advantage of the fortress Korone Barrier!"

"When did you create that fortress?"

Akuto could not believe what he was hearing, but it was true Korone was helping resolve everything. He decided he could leave it to her, so he nodded toward her.

"Then I shall head out to battle. Demon king, enjoy yourself while dancing and listening to music. The invisible maids will prepare it for you," said Korone.

"Dancing and music?" complained Akuto, but Keena's cheerful voice cut in.

"Dancing and music! That's right! I forgot what mattered with a castle! It slipped my mind because there aren't very many people here!"

Keena's eyes were sparkling.

"Enjoy yourselves," said Korone as she left.

Music then began playing.

"Eh?"

"Wah! C'mon, A-chan, let's dance!"

Keena pulled on Akuto's hand.

As he saw more and more smoke signals rising, Yoshihiko nodded.

"Oh, no. The students decided their level is high enough to begin an attack on the demon king's castle," he commented.

Junko nodded with a displeased look. The giant fusion between an octopus and four-legged beast was shaking the earth as it walked in the distance ahead of them.

"Have they not noticed that monster?"

The monster was several dozen meters tall. It would be visible from a distance, but it was unlikely every single student scattered across the world had seen it.

"I doubt all of those who see it will realize it isn't a character from the game. Do we have no choice but to defeat it?"

Yoshihiko turned to Junko and Keisu.

Junko was still hesitating, but Keisu gave a powerful nod.

"I think we should defeat it. It...might be the demon king. We cannot let the demon king acquire the holy grail."

"In the game, the holy grail is in the demon king's castle and that monster is headed in that direction. Also, our contact with the outside world was cut off when this monster appeared."

Yoshihiko produced a screen in midair and checked once more.

He then nodded resolutely.

"If we can do anything, we have to do it. Let's hurry. We are quite a long way from the demon king's castle."

Yoshihiko began walking after the octopus monster.

"By the way, what happens if the demon king acquires the holy grail?" asked Junko.

Keisu readily gave a terrifying answer.

"He gains his perfect form."

"The time has come to show off our power!"

Fujiko gave her orders. The female students and the NPC armies under their command let out a cry. They were all female.

"What is that?"

"This is Etou Fujiko-sama's Amazon army!"

At the head of the military force advancing toward the demon king's castle was Fujiko riding a Cerberus and carrying a flag bearing the "E" of Etou.

Fujiko and some of the other female students had formed an alliance and quickly grown to the largest force among the students. They had done so primarily by attacking the male students.

It had begun when some of the male students had attempted to sneak into the female students' tents. The boys had decided there was no harm in peeking since this was a game, but the girls had fiercely fought back. To stop that conflict, Fujiko had suggested acting as a group.

Fujiko was popular enough that the number of girls under her command continued to grow as they travelled. The creation of a group and the comfort of it all being a game had radicalized their thinking. It became implicitly acceptable to kill any of the boys that opposed them.

This radicalization had of course been secretly instigated by Fujiko. She had been the first to realize killing fellow students gave extremely high experience. She had indirectly advocated hunting the boys to strengthen the girls allied with her.

"But Fujiko-sama is so kind..."

"If only those other girls weren't with her..."

Fujiko had mastered her villainy to the point that even the surviving boys were convinced that was true.

With Fujiko's Amazon army of seven thousand at the lead, more and more armies joined with the Anti-Demon King Alliance.

Students hidden to the left and right would join up with them as they continued along the path and those students' NPC armies would follow.

Ultimately, the alliance reached three hundred twenty thousand and it held up many different flags as it advanced. It moved toward Korone Barrier. The wide path narrowed at one point and a fortress had been constructed there. Wall-like cliffs rose up on either side of the path, making it look like a giant dried up river. The cliffs were several dozen meters tall, so one could only attack on the level of dropping rocks if one climbed up to the top. Either way, the battle came down to defeating the fortress head on.

"So it begins here."

The students' excited muttering rose up into the sky. The cliffs approached on either side and the people and horses of the army created a single black stream that looked like muddy water flowing through the dried up river with tremendous force.

A giant wall blocked the path like a dam in the river. That wall was decorated with flags bearing the word "demon".

"It's the demon king's army!"

"They haven't left the castle yet!"

"Bring out the battering ram! If we break down the gate, we win!"

The alliance continued charging forward. The one person to slow down was Fujiko.

—Heh heh. Once the students gain more experience in this battle, I will find the perfect moment to offer them to Akuto-sama. This plan is perfect! And finally, I will offer my own body up to Akuto-sama... Ahhh! Akuto-sama will kill me with his own hands... Such bliss! Just the thought of it and I can barely contain myself!

While lost in her delusions, Fujiko slowed down and hid herself within the army so that she could survive. She also surrounded herself with female students. This was a truly cowardly action, but she was amazingly able to do so without those around her growing suspicious.

Meanwhile, those at the head of the army arrived at the fortress.

One boy's army had prepared a battering ram, but a shower of arrows suddenly rained down on him and his army. Orc soldiers under Korone's command had been hiding atop the fortress and they began their attack.

"Waaaah!"

The battering ram unit was defeated.

That shower of arrows signaled the beginning of a fierce battle.

The soldiers in the lead held their shields above their heads and reached the fortress wall. They began placing ladders against the wall and desperately holding them in place. The following soldiers began climbing those ladders.

More arrows poured down. Soldiers so full of arrows they looked like hedgehogs fell from the ladders and struck the soldiers behind them.

Even so, the soldiers held their shields up and continued climbing. More and more ladders were set up and the arrows were dispersed over more points. This allowed the soldiers to make it higher and higher up the ladders before being shot down.

"This is our chance! Bring the battering ram!"

On the orders of one student, a giant log with wheels attached was pulled forward by several soldiers. The battering ram was slammed against the fortress's gate. The entire gate shook.

Some of the raining arrows turned toward them and the concentration of arrows dropped further. Finally, one of the soldiers reached the top of the gate just as the battering ram broke through it.

"Let's destroy them all!"

The students let out cries, thinking they had reversed the situation. The soldiers rushed through the gate while shouting out.

The soldiers who had climbed up the ladders began defeating the orc archers with their swords. The number of arrows raining down lessened.

The soldiers who passed through the gate ran into a group of spear-wielding goblin soldiers waiting on the other side of the wall. The demon king army formed a new wall with their spears and shields, but they only numbered several hundred. Even if they could stab the leading soldiers with their spears, they could not defend against the great number of soldiers pressing in.

The center of the dense formation was breached and the goblin soldiers scattered. The cavalry had been waiting for the downpour of arrows to finally stop, but they appeared now and shot and cut down the goblins one by one.

"We can do this!"

More and more voices cried out as they were certain of their victory.

But one person was less certain. It was Fujiko as she watched the battlefield from the very back of the army.

—This is odd. Korone should be in command here, yet I have not seen her. And there were only about twenty thousand soldiers waiting for us. No matter how difficult it is to put large numbers in this fortress, I can

only assume she is saving her forces for some other purpose.

Fujiko planned to offer up the students' experience points to Akuto, so she wanted to avoid a complete defeat to Korone. And if possible, she wanted to defeat Korone herself.

—But the only place to keep the rest of her troops is on top of the cliffs.

Fujiko looked up at one cliff.

It was several dozen to a hundred meters tall. Rocks could be dropped down, but there was no sign of any large number of rocks having been prepared. Also, they would not have enough rocks to block off the path, so the army could ignore the rocks and continue on, rendering that strategy pointless. To use rocks effectively, it would be best to use them while they were concentrated at the fortress wall.

—If she was to attack with an army, it would be best to attack from the flank while we are stretched through the fortress's gate, but I see no sign of an army hiding anywhere.

And then Fujiko's thoughts were cut off.

"Gwa ha ha ha ha ha! So we meet again! Demon General Korone has arrived!"

Korone's voice rang out.

She was on top of the cliff. She must have been waiting for the alliance forces to stretch out after breaching the fortress gate because she appeared directly to the side.

“Don’t be afraid! They can’t hit with arrows from that distance!”

“Continue on! They can’t have that many rocks!”

The male students gave instructions like that.

That was the same as what Fujiko had thought.

—But there has to be something I am missing.

Fujiko ordered the female students to stop.

And then Korone took action.

“Exterminate them!” she shouted as she ordered her troops to advance.

The orcs and goblins began jumping from the cliff one after another.

“Wha-...!?”

The soldiers down below gasped. After all, flight magic did not exist in this world. The enemy soldiers could only fall.

"Advance! Advance!"

But Korone expressionlessly ordered them onward. The soldiers of the demon king army continued jumping.

"Wh-what is she doing?"

Those watching could not believe their eyes. However, Fujiko alone realized the truth.

"We have lost. No... If we do not want to lose, we must close the fortress gate!"

Fujiko gave instructions. The female students had yet to pass through the gate, but they now shut that gate they had worked so hard to open. They also began removing the ladders.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

The male students began to panic, but they did not have time to focus on the gate.

"Wh-what!?"

Their eyes opened wide in shock.

Corpses began piling up in front of the cliff. They of course belonged to the soldiers of the demon king army. Those corpses formed a slope which an elite unit led by Korone ran down.

"You're kidding!"

The male students were shocked and quickly routed.

Anyone with a human heart would have hesitated from using this strategy. No, it may have been possible in a normal game, but only Korone could have used such an abnormal strategy in this world that felt so real.

"Cut off their heads to be sure! Take no prisoners!"

Korone sent the elite unit in every direction. The stretched out alliance army was split into several sections and the isolated soldiers were surrounded and defeated. Korone's strategy was especially effective because she targeted the commanders. The rules of the game said a soldier would disappear once his commander had been lost. A single beam of light from Korone would eliminate thousands of soldiers.

The male students who had passed through the fortress gate were forced to flee, but Korone pursued them and took them out one by one with her beam attack.

"Damn you, Sai Akuto. How could you order Korone-chan to do this? You aren't human."

"So the truly terrible one is the demon king..."

The boys went to their deaths never doubting that Korone's cruel strategy had been Akuto's doing.

And before long, Korone had slaughtered everyone there.

Ultimately, Korone had sacrificed tens of thousands of soldiers to create a path for her thousands of soldiers which then defeated an army of hundreds of thousands.

"You monster!" shouted Fujiko from the other side of the fortress.

Only the seventy thousand troops of the girl-led Amazon army remained.

"A-chan, this war is scary."

As elegant music surrounded them, Keena clung to Akuto's arm while wearing a dress.

They were watching the battle at Korone Barrier from the terrace.

"It's only a game. But even as a game, this intensity is fairly thought provoking. Wars take up so much money, but they are so empty," said Akuto.

He was wearing white clothes as well.

"Yeah, war isn't right. But..."

Keena turned toward a table bearing a luxurious feast.

It had plain onigiri, fried rice, pilafs, doria, dry curry, rice cakes, and rice pudding. Keena held a glass of amazake.

"It feels hypocritical to say that while wearing such lovely clothes and dancing in front of so much delicious food."

"You have a point. We really are the villains here. Then again, I wouldn't call this food 'delicious'. How did it end up like this?" complained Akuto

Suddenly, he noticed a change in the scenery.

"Ah!"

"What is it?"

"Look at that."

Akuto pointed beyond the battlefield.

Something taller than the trees of the jungle was slowly walking toward them.

Keena screamed when she saw it.

"Kyah! A-A-chan. You can't go there."

Keena was clearly afraid.

"Is that the interference from outside the game that Korone was talking about?"

Akuto embraced Keena as he watched the creature. It looked like a four-legged beast with an octopus for a head. It looked evil.

"I have a really bad feeling about that thing. I'm worried."

Akuto felt Keena trembling.

That told him something was wrong more than anything. Keena was always so carefree, but this terrified her.

"A bad feeling?"

"Its presence is similar but different to yours. It's really unpleasant."

"Don't worry. You just have to stay here," said Akuto as he moved away

from Keena.

"No, don't go."

"I have to. It seems to be headed this way."

The creature's movements looked slow, but it was approaching at a speed appropriate for its giant form.

"And if its presence is similar to mine, I really do have to go, right?"

Keena finally nodded her head in acceptance.

"But be careful."

"I will."

Akuto nodded and began running.

"Gwa ha ha ha ha! Bow down before me, Amazons!" shouted Korone.

The fortress gate was closed off from both sides, so the allied army had lost a large number of troops without breaking through the fortress. All that remained were the 70,000 of Fujiko's Amazon army.

Fujiko could see no way to defeat Korone who stood atop that fortress. But if they retreated, she would undoubtedly pursue them and wipe them all out.

"Onee-sama! What should we do?"

"This is not good. I would hate to admit defeat even if this is a game."

Fujiko made up her mind and raised her head.

"Demon General Korone! I challenge you to single combat!" shouted Fujiko as she stepped forward.

This was a final desperate plea that Korone had no obligation to answer, but she did so readily enough.

"Do you really think a mere human can defeat me?"

Korone opened the fortress gate and came out alone.

"When you say it, I cannot tell if you are acting or not," complained Fujiko.

—I will eventually have to fight Korone for real in the process of improving Akuto-sama. This is a good opportunity to learn how she fights.

Fujiko kicked at the Cerberus and moved quickly forward. Korone was a magician, so Fujiko and her Cerberus would be at an advantage in direct combat. If she charged forward, she could reach Korone as long as she could withstand two magical attacks.

“Beam! Beam!”



And Korone used those two attacks to their fullest. Both hit Fujiko.

“Kh!”

But Fujiko survived with a tiny amount of hit points left. She drank a

recovery potion she had mixed herself and regained the health she needed to withstand direct combat. She then swung her whip at Korone.

"Did you think this would come down to our in-game stats in close quarters combat?"

Korone swung up her staff and blocked the whip. The whip wrapped around the staff.

"Our stats are meaningless. I thought I would see your fighting habits outside of your strategy."

Fujiko pulled the whip and stopped Korone's movements. If Korone let go of the staff, she would have lost her weapon. Normally, it would then come down to a comparison of strength.

However...

"There."

Korone swung the staff and moved forward.

A normal human would reflexively resist having one's movements restricted, but Korone showed no such reflex.

"Oh, no."

Korone attacked Fujiko with the handle of the staff. A physical attack from a magician did not do much damage, but it caused decent mental shock.

“You really do have tremendous resolution when it comes to combat.”

“The humans known as masters show that trait as well. Any normal L’Isle-Adam combat program will take that into consideration,” explained Korone indifferently as she sent down a shower of blows with the staff.

—Geh. If I have to fight Korone in the real world, I need to find some kind of weakness.

Fujiko regretted her decision, but her pride would not allow her to admit defeat.

—I need to put up a smokescreen and wait for another opportunity.

Just as Fujiko had that thought, she heard a tremendous scream from behind her.

She was so focused on Korone that she hesitated to turn around. However, she slowly turned around once she felt a shadow cover her and Korone moved back and pointed behind her.

“Ee!”

A monster stood there.

It had slimy skin, its body was that of a four-legged beast, its head was an octopus, and it was several dozen meters tall.

"Wh-what is that thing!?" said Fujiko in what was almost a scream.

Korone's response was perfectly calm.

"It is a monster that is not part of that game. It seems to be attacking us. We should fall back and watch on."

Korone began moving toward the fortress gate.

"Y-yes. It is unfortunate we cannot complete our match, but we have no choice. Everyone, through the gate!"

With that instruction, Fujiko ran through the gate herself.

But as Fujiko's followers rushed toward the gate, the monster moved more quickly than expected and caught up with them. The monster did not exactly attack them. It swung the tentacles coming from its head to sweep aside the female students as if they were merely in the way.

"Kyaaah!"

Screams rang out as girls were thrown into the air where they turned to dust and disappeared.

"It seems this creature has taken on the rules of the game," commented Korone.

"That is good even if nothing else about this is."

Fujiko trembled as she looked up at the monster on the other side of the gate. Nothing stopped its advance. It brushed the girls aside, trampled them underfoot, and finally began slamming its body against the fortress.

A great rumbling ran through the earth. The fortress shook and smashed pieces of stone fell from above.

"What is this thing?"

"It seems to have been created by someone hacking in from outside and it seems to have been given some kind of objective. I believe it is pursuing that objective and nothing else."

"So if we flee, it will not bother us?"

"Most likely."

"Then we should do so right away."

Fujiko prepared to flee, but she then noticed a change come over the monster's actions. It had been trying to move forward, but it now

stopped and swung its front legs up to reach a standing position. It looked like a building being lifted up by a crane or a giant object suddenly protruding up from the earth.

"Ee!"

Despite knowing this was a game, Fujiko could not suppress the fear. She understood why the monster had done that the instant she turned around to flee.

"A-Akuto-sama!"

The monster had clearly reacted to Akuto's arrival. Its emotionless eyes were following Akuto as he walked toward the fortress.

"Its objective is the demon king? How very odd," muttered Korone.

Suddenly, someone shouted out from behind the monster.

"That thing is the sealed demon king!"

It was Junko's voice.

The monster had been faster than them, so they had only caught up once it arrived at the fortress. Junko could see Korone and Fujiko beyond the gate visible between the monster's legs.

"That thing is the sealed demon king!" shouted Junko.

"The demon king? What are you talking about?" replied Fujiko.

"It seems something was sealed in this space from the beginning and external interference has brought it out!" explained Junko.

"Sealed?"

"Someone who was already in this space said it was the demon king. It might be the demon king of an earlier generation."

"Really?"

Fujiko closed her eyes in thought, looked back at the monster, and then spoke.

"It reacted when it saw Akuto-sama, so that might be true."

"Akuto is here?" asked Junko.

Fujiko nodded.

"He just arrived!"

"That monster reacted when it saw Sai Akuto?"

Junko found that odd, so she looked to Yoshihiko. However, Yoshihiko did not seem especially bothered by it.

"I wonder if there is some connection there. At any rate, we need to speak with him. If we could defeat that thing and make our way to the other side..." said Yoshihiko.

"Defeat it? I do not think the demon king can be defeated. That is why it was sealed in the first place," commented Keisu.

But Junko shook her head.

"But you saw when it defeated those students, right? Fortunately, it seems to exist as a monster in the game. That means it can be defeated."

Junko threw a shuriken at the monster's back.

The monster did not seem to care, but a wound appeared on its back.

"This can work, right?"

Junko grinned and Yoshihiko nodded.

"It's worth a shot."

The two of them began attacking the back legs of the monster with their swords. Their attacks were enough to cause it to move slightly. It had completely ignored them until they attacked, but the injuries to its legs caused it to shake its legs as if driving away an insect.

“Then I shall attack, too.”

Keisu grabbed the sword on her back in preparation to draw it, but she suddenly stopped. A snake was wrapped around the scabbard. That snake had slithered up to the grip and waited for Keisu to reach behind her back.

“Nh!”

By the time Keisu noticed, it was too late.

The snake bit her hand.

All life seemed to vanish from her eyes and she stood stock still.

Neither Yoshihiko nor Junko noticed what was happening.

—Good! It worked!

The snake secretly grinned.

This was of course the green snake 2V had transformed into. It had

clung to the monster's body, dropped off just before the monster reached the fortress, and hid in a nearby thicket. From there, it had waited for a good opportunity.

—It's a good thing I took the form of a snake. I just had to make a few modifications to the snake's venom!

2V left Keisu's hand and slipped inside the collar of her clothes.

2V then used a spell she specialized in. As a doll user, 2V could influence L'Isle-Adams if she concentrated her power. This was only possible in the game because 2V had rewritten that portion of the program.

The snake completely disappeared into Keisu's clothes and Keisu's body finally began moving again.

However, life did not return to her eyes. Keisu tossed her sword up to draw it, caught it in midair, and landed, but all of it was done under 2V's control.

Korone informed Akuto of the situation and he nodded when he understood the gist of it.

"You mean that character isn't in the game?"

"It seems that way."

"But it obeys the rules of the game. What is going on?"

"Either this is interference from outside the game or this is the influence of the person that existed inside the virtual alternate dimension from the beginning. I cannot say which."

"I see. But this will be a giant pain if we don't take care of it, right? It's obeying the rules of the game, so let's defeat it as a monster in the game." Akuto began giving Korone instructions. "Reorganize the NPC army. The moment the fortress falls is our chance to attack. That monster is sure to show an opening."

Korone nodded.

"As you wish."

Korone began instructing the army of orcs and goblins, but Fujiko suddenly shouted out.

"Kiiii! I wanted to play that role!"

"Is that so? Too bad," said Korone calmly.

Fujiko was blatantly angry.

"Couldn't I give up my position?"

"A class change requires a ticket. Tickets may be purchased at the online store," replied Korone mechanically.

"I was not aware this game made money like that," complained Fujiko.

Meanwhile, the monster's actions grew more fierce and wild. It had been trying to destroy the fortress, but it began writhing irregularly and slamming its giant body randomly against the fortress. Junko and Yoshihiko's attacks were proving effective.

"They are doing well. His weapon seems to be especially effective."

As she reorganized the army, Korone pointed at the monster's feet.

Yoshihiko's double-edged sword, Evil Slayer, was an amazing magic sword. The giant monster writhed to keep its back legs away from the attack and it used its tentacles solely for keeping Yoshihiko at a distance.

The monster succeeded in destroying the fortress and tried to flee beyond it just as Korone finished putting getting the army into formation. The stones making up the foundation could be heard cracking and the entire fortress began toppling toward Akuto and the others.

"It's falling!" warned Fujiko.

Akuto gave an order.

"Have the army charge toward it. They can get on top of that monster from the fortress. Have them cling to its back regardless of the crumbling stone. Make sure they can continue to attack even after it stands up."

The demon king's soldiers and demonic beasts charged straight forward even as crumbling stone poured down like rain and the walls of the fortress collapsed. Naturally, a lot of the orc soldiers and demonic beasts died miserable deaths as they were crushed beneath the rocks.

"Ahh! Such a coldhearted command! I have so much to learn from you!" exclaimed Fujiko as she writhed about.

Even if they were not human, the demonic beast soldiers looked very real. For a non-L'Isle-Adam to sacrifice them like that, Akuto's mentality was far from normal.

And his strategy worked. The fallen monster stood back up, but it was covered in orc soldiers who acted like blood-sucking ticks. The monster let out a roar and swung its tentacles around. It began striking its own body in order to knock off the orc soldiers. It succeeded in knocking a lot of them off, but it was still left with swords stabbing into it over and over again, causing continual damage.

Junko and Yoshihiko had moved away as the fortress collapsed, but they began to attack once more. Yoshihiko's Evil Slayer caused even greater damage to the monster.

"This is going to work," said Fujiko with a smile.

"Should you really say that when you have done nothing yourself?" asked Korone.

But Fujiko did not care.

"I am providing moral support for Akuto-sama."

However, Fujiko's smile froze over. The monster was either trying to escape the effects of Evil Slayer or risking everything on a single attack because its death was near. It stood up tall, gave a scream-like cry into the air, and charged directly for Akuto.

"Akuto-sama!" screamed Fujiko.

Akuto took a defensive stance.

"Don't worry. I've survived an aircraft carrier running into-..."

Akuto trailed off before he could finish.

A tentacle swept in from the side. Akuto tried to turn aside the attack, but he could not. The tentacle wrapped around his body and tossed him like a doll.

He flew over ten meters, struck the bare rock, and groaned.

"Gh!"

Akuto's body was almost buried in the rock.

"Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko cried out in concern, but Akuto replied along with a light hand motion.

"I'm fine. It seems that attack doesn't exceed the limits of the game. As long as I don't get hit a second time, I won't die in the game."

Suddenly, someone else shouted toward him. It was Junko who was slicing at the monster from behind.

"No! It seems this monster is after the holy grail in the castle, not your life! No one knows what will happen if it gets the holy grail! It might even affect the real world! This may be a game, but we might have no way of stopping this monster if you lose!"

Junko's words surprised Akuto a bit, but he quickly realized it fit with the other things he knew.

—Come to think of it, the holy grail was a change from the original game. And it said for the demon king to acquire it, but nothing happened when I picked it up despite the fact that I'm the demon king in the game. If this thing is the demon king instead...!

"Kh..."

Akuto stood up and tried to fall back to the castle, but the monster began charging at him again.

"Recovery magic."

Akuto tried to use recovery magic on himself, but realized he could not.

"In exchange for his automatic regeneration ability, the demon king cannot use recovery magic! Your magic power doesn't drop when you use magic, but it would be unfair if you could heal infinitely!" explained Yoshihiko.

"That's...not good."

Akuto prepared for death.

Despite Yoshihiko and Junko's efforts, the monster was not stopping. A tentacle attacked Akuto once more. He tried to use defense magic, but he knew it would never be enough given how much damage he took before.

"Oh, no."

Akuto cursed his own conceitedness. He had charged into battle without knowing the situation or rules and assumed it would all work out okay.

The tentacle drew closer.

Akuto reflexively closed his eyes.

He heard the sound of something large crashing into stone.

"I'm glad this is a game. Next time, I need to..."

As Akuto began to mutter to himself, he realized he felt no pain and instead felt something wrapping around his body.

—Hm? I thought you were supposed to feel pain in here.

He opened his eyes and realized he was still in the game.

"What?"

He was also floating in the air. Flying was forbidden in this game, so it should have been impossible.

—That means...

"C'mon, A-chan. You really can't do anything without me, can you?" rebuked Keena.

"I told you to stay in the castle. ...But you did save me," said Akuto in relief.

Keena was flying while holding Akuto under his arms. Akuto recalled that Keena alone could ignore the rules in this world.

"But it's dangerous, so you need to head back," said Akuto as he looked down.

The monster had crashed its head into a rock wall.

"Lower me down. I need to defeat that thing."

But Keena shook her head.

"I can't. A-chan, you have a bad habit of wanting to do everything yourself. That thing is targeting you, so you should tell the others what to do."

Keena's words stabbed at Akuto because of his earlier failure.

"You're right. Trying to solve this on my own only led to failure."

Akuto sighed and shook his head decisively, and called to those below.

"Senpai! When I give the signal, blind that monster!"

"Yes, Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko nodded ecstatically.

"You two in the back, attack its legs once it's blinded to throw off its sense of direction!"

"Understood!"

Junko and Yoshihiko exchanged a glance and nodded before answering.

"Korone, use the surviving soldiers to open the monster's mouth!"

"As you wish."

As soon as Korone gave her answer, Akuto gave his signal to Fujiko.

"Senpai!"

"Understood!" replied Fujiko.

As the monster tried to stand up and regain its position, Fujiko threw a potion that produced a smokescreen.

The monster had yet to fully stand up, so the potion bottle struck it directly on the face. Despite being wrapped in white smoke, the monster stood up and tried to reach Akuto. It likely planned to jump up at the location it remembered Akuto being in.



But Junko and Yoshihiko attacked at the monster's back legs. They cut at those legs the instant it tried to put its weight on them, so it collapsed.

"Korone!"

Korone acted on Akuto's instruction. The soldiers still clinging to the monster moved to its neck and Korone fired lightning magic at them. The soldiers convulsed as the lightning struck them, but the electricity passed through their swords and into the monster those swords were stabbed into.

With a pained roar, the monster raised its jaws and revealed the mouth hidden below the tentacles.

"Keena!"

Akuto had Keena fly directly upwards and drop him.

As he fell, he fired the strongest attack magic in the game toward the monster's upturned mouth.

"Fallout!"

A nuclear explosion occurred inside the monster's mouth, tremendous heat and light shot from the octopus head, and it collapsed onto its back.

Lily shouted in joy as she saw the monster collapse on the mana screen.

"Ha ha! Looks like you lost. That original demon king was defeated!"

But 2V's expression remained unchanged.

Lily's smile gradually disappeared. 2V was clearly plotting something.

"What do you have up your sleeve?"

"Oh, it's just that this isn't over. It isn't over at all."

"It isn't over?"

"If you thought that monster was the original demon king that was sealed in the virtual alternate dimension, you're quite the idiot."

2V giggled.

Lily was shocked.

"Then the original demon king is still in there? Is that holy grail the condition for awakening it?"

"Exactly. The holy grail is a program chip stored in the virtual alternate dimension. It became the holy grail when it was brought inside the game, but it is actually a portion of the original demon king."

"So you created that monster as-...!"

"As a bluff, yes. It was meant to distract people from the real demon king. I want the original demon king to be revived. My original plan was to seal the current demon king, but I changed my mind once I realized the original demon king was there. I will have them return to the real world along with the original demon king. And of course, it doesn't matter who dies in the process."

"Wh-what? Then the original demon king is actually..."

Lily trailed off as the mana screen continued to show the game footage.

"So this ends the game."

Akuto checked on the monster's corpse and waited for it to eventually disappear.

Yoshihiko walked over and bowed his head.

"I apologize for getting you wrapped up in this."

"Are you the one behind all this?"

Akuto looked questioningly toward Yoshihiko. Yoshihiko knew this was to be expected, so he shook his head apologetically.

"I cannot deny that I am behind it. I was the one who trapped you in this virtual alternate dimension, after all. However, we still have to worry about 2V."

"2V? Of CIMO 8?" asked Akuto.

Yoshihiko nodded.

"Yes. This was 2V's plan. You could also say it was the government's plan. I know this is no excuse, but I did not know about the plan to seal the demon king in here. When I learned about it at the last second, I decided to not cooperate. By adding in the rules of this game, I made sure no one would be killed inside and that I could speak with you."

"In that case, you actually saved me. You don't need to apologize. I'm thankful. Anyway, what is this about a demon king being in here from the beginning?"

Akuto looked toward the corpse of the monster and shook his head.

"This virtual alternate dimension is used to protect the god Megis. It seems some ancient demon king was sealed inside it. Or maybe this virtual alternate dimension was set up in the first place to seal it. Either way, it was completely forgotten about," explained Yoshihiko.

"I see. The first demon king... I find it hard to believe so suddenly, but we should be able to investigate it after safely leaving this game. Now that I know 2V is my enemy, I should be able to put together a plan once I return. By the way, I see someone else I don't recognize."

Akuto faced Keisu who stood behind Yoshihiko.

"She too was apparently already inside this virtual alternate dimension. She says she was protecting the dimension so the demon king would not be revived."

Yoshihiko called Keisu over.

At the same time, the game's corpse display time reached its end and the giant monster's corpse vanished. Keena must have sensed something because she suddenly cried out.

"Wait!"

Akuto stopped walking toward Keisu and turned around.

"What is it?"

"The bad feeling from before is still here. I still sense something unpleasant that's similar to you, A-chan," said Keena as she trembled.

"Then that wasn't the demon king?"

Akuto pointed toward where the monster's corpse had been.

"That's right... But it's definitely somewhere nearby," said Keena with a nod.

"Then it's no surprise we could defeat that monster according to the rules of the game. What should we do now?" asked Akuto as he looked around at the others.

"Even if the demon king is here, the holy grail is in the castle, right? As long as he does not acquire it, there should be no problem. How about we simply end the game here?" suggested Fujiko.

"No. If the last survivor does not acquire the holy grail, the game will not end. And we were only trying to end the game because someone who does not follow the game's rules would be able to damage us in reality," said Yoshihiko. He turned toward Akuto and added, "It seemed

like 2V knew what was sealed in here. He was probably plotting to kill you here using that fact.”

“Understood. Either way, I just have to win the game. But 2V is still in here. And he might be you. Sorry, but I can’t fully trust you.”

Akuto stared at Yoshihiko.

Junko frantically cut in.

“Wait a second. Um...I was with him. I think you can trust him.”

But Yoshihiko waved his hand to say her support was not needed.

“No. It is only natural for him to not trust me. I already said I would take the blame for what I did. However, it is not as if the two of us have never met. I never expected this to be how we fulfilled our promise of playing video games together, though.”

Yoshihiko winked at Akuto.

Akuto immediately realized what that wink meant. His eyes widened in surprise and he nodded.

“I see. So you look different in here because you made the rules.”

“Exactly. But I still don’t blame you if you don’t trust me. I caused all this

and I realize now just how inexperienced I am. I overlooked the importance of physical communication. She taught me just how important it is. She is quite noble and kind."

Yoshihiko smiled toward Junko.

Junko frantically shook her head.

"Stop that. That is not true at all..."

Junko tried to deny it, but she found herself unable to look Akuto in the eye. Yoshihiko made it sound like something had happened between them while they were alone together. While things had indeed happened, none of it had been romantic in nature. Even if he had said he wanted her to like him.

At any rate, the current atmosphere made it look like something had happened and she was curious what Akuto's expression would be when he realized it. In all honesty, she hoped he would look upset.

However...

"That's true. Once we get back to the real world, you should spend the day with her at least once," said Akuto.

Junko started to wobble on her feet and her vision seemed to go dark.

"Are you okay?" asked Yoshihiko as he caught Junko.

Everyone turned toward Junko.

At that exact moment, Keisu took swift action. She leaned her body forward as she ran. She quickly swiped Yoshihiko's Evil Slayer from its scabbard and charged toward Akuto.

The tip of the magic sword was accurately aimed toward Akuto's throat. Keisu's speed put incredibly force behind the blade.

But Akuto had predicted this action.

"That isn't going to work. I realized you alone do not obey the rules of this game."

Akuto had not been distracted. He avoided the quickly moving sword by jumping to the side and he slammed his fist into Keisu's gut.

"Gh!"

Keisu passed out and collapsed.

"Now your plan is at its end."

Lily cracked her knuckles.

That had likely been 2V's last resort.

"So that Keisu was the demon king. Your plan to kill Akuto is over. Can I start punching you now? I don't think I can resist much longer."

"No, no." 2V remained calm. "Unfortunately for you, my plan is not over yet. My hopes have not yet failed. I still have another trick up my sleeve. And Zero is still doing well."

"Zero? Is that the name of the original demon king?"

"Yes. Zero will grant my wish."

"Your wish? And what is that?"

"Control. I want to control everything. And the ideal existence to grant that wish is Zero. The very first...that is to say, the prototype demon king was created with the abilities needed to destroy the world ruled by the initial gods."

"Wh-what are you talking about? What exactly do you mean!?"

"You still don't get it? Zero can control artificial intelligences and cause them to malfunction. After all, the original gods were similar to modern L'Isle-Adam AIs."

This shocked Lily.

"What? And you've resurrected this person!?"

"Yes. Just watch. This will continue and it should last a while!"

2V laughed loudly.

"She was the only one not following the game's rules," said Akuto as he looked at Keisu's collapsed form.

He held his right hand out toward her and fired magic.

"Lightning."

That was the incantation for the game's lighting magic. Electricity shot down at Keisu's back. A snake slithered from her clothes, died, and turned to dust.

"What was that snake?" asked Fujiko.

"2V came here as only an arm. He might very well have become a snake," answered Yoshihiko.

"2V uses dolls to act, so he might have been able to control L'Isle-Adams," said Fujiko.

"I see," said Yoshihiko. "And Keisu is a L'Isle-Adam. That means she did

nothing wrong herself.”

“Then is there nothing more to worry about?” asked Akuto.

Yoshihiko nodded.

“Probably not. Your punch stopped her temporarily, but we can ask her about it once she comes to. She probably doesn’t know any of the details, though. We can take our time completing the game afterwards.”

“I see. Then...”

Akuto crouched down next to Keisu as he spoke.

“Watch out!” shouted Keena.

She shoved Akuto to the side.

“Eh?”

Akuto was confused and he felt a cold sensation in his gut.

“Kyaaah!”

“Akuto-sama!”

He heard screams from all around.

"Wha-...?"

Akuto realized Evil Slayer was stabbed deeply into his gut.

A sensation different from damage in the game spread across his body. His stomach felt cold, but the hand he placed there felt warmth.

"Why?"

"The sword... The sword moved on its own!" shouted Fujiko.

"It did. The sword flew. It was as if it had been waiting for this opportunity," confirmed Korone.

"Then...this sword is the original demon king? A-anyway, I need to regenerate. I just need to concentrate mana inside me and..."

Akuto tried to recover from the damage as normal, but he could not. Every time he tried to gather strength, the wound would throb.

"A-chan!"

Keena ran over and used the game's recovery magic, but it had no effect on Akuto's wound.

"We need to return you to reality before you die. You can be healed there."

Korone calmly held up her staff.

"Wh-what are you-...?"

Fujiko raised a confused voice, but Korone fired a deadly magic beam.

It splendidly shot straight through Akuto's head.

Akuto's body convulsed and his eyes closed. He had died in the game, so he turned to dust.

And Evil Slayer remained.

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise.

The sword remained floating in midair where it had been stabbing into Akuto's gut.

"Not good! The monster and Keisu were both camouflage! If the original demon king was disguised as the most powerful sword, anyone would take it with them on their quest for the holy grail! That was the trick!"

Fujiko was clever when it came to evil plans, so she caught on quickly.

"Be careful, everyone. We have no way of knowing what will happen!" warned Junko.

"The sword may only have limited power and might only be able to fly over short distances. Otherwise, it would not need anyone to carry it," said Yoshihiko.

"The holy grail is in the castle. This is dangerous, but we only have to keep the sword from heading there!"

Junko turned toward the castle.

However...

"Oh...the holy grail... Whoops. I thought it was important, so I brought it with me."

Keena pulled the holy grail out from her robe.

It was a small, shiny gold cup.

"You idiot!" shouted Fujiko, but it was too late.

Evil Slayer aka Zero flew toward Keena. She avoided it, but she was unable to stop Zero from touching the holy grail.

As soon as the holy grail and sword touched, they both burst apart and became a thin mist.

"Ah!" cried Keena in surprise.

"Oh, no. I don't know what the first demon king is, but this means the game is over. We'll all be sent back to the real world!" said Yoshihiko.

"Th-then the original demon king will be revived in the real world!?"

Junko picked up Keisu. She awoke from being knocked out, so Junko asked a question.

"Please tell us. What will happen if the original demon king is revived?"

Keisu opened her eyes as Junko shook her.

"Zero will..."

Before Keisu could finish speaking, the game ended.

Chapter 5: The Beginning of a Dream

Hiroshi sensed something unpleasant.

He looked around to figure out what it was. He quickly realized it was due to the state of the city.

He was watching the second floor of the apartment building as Lily had asked him to. He had of course been watching the scenery outside the hallway, and he had noticed something was off due to a small change in the city below.

Small sounds of destruction were rising from the city. The ground vehicles were stopped.

"What? Did something bad happen?"

Hiroshi heard a sound from above and looked up. He saw a flying bus crash into the city beyond the apartment building.

"What!?"

The bus slammed into ground and exploded. Several nearby houses were caught in the blast.

Needless to say, this was a great disaster. Hiroshi could imagine that even greater damage was occurring in the more urban part of the city.

"W-wah..."

Hiroshi was not sure if he should obey Lily's instructions or head after her, but when he saw more and more residents of the apartment start to open their doors and come out, he decided to rush to the room Lily had gone to.

When he opened the door and ran inside, he saw the student council president fighting with several dolls in a small space.

"If you're here, then help!" shouted Lily.

"Wh-what is going on!?"

Hiroshi received an answer from a thin and sickly looking girl being carried by a doll outside a broken window.

"I won."

Hiroshi figured out that the girl was 2V.

What he could not figure out was why Lily was having so much trouble with those dolls.

"President, hurry up and knock those things away!" said Hiroshi.

However, the dolls would stand back up no matter how many times Lily

punched them.

"These are different from the others! They're oddly powerful."

Lily blew away the attacking dolls with her special attacks, but the dolls seemed to release their joints at the perfect timing to reduce the damage taken.

"2V! You weren't this skilled at fighting before!" roared Lily, but 2V only laughed.

"Hah! You've got it all wrong. You still don't get it. I'm not controlling them."

"What?"

"What if there was someone more skilled at using dolls than me? What if there was someone who could control multiple L'Isle-Adams at once?"

"Shut up! No one could do that! ...No, wait. You can't mean..."

Lily was left speechless.

"Ha ha ha ha! That's exactly what I mean! Didn't I tell you!? Zero, the first demon king, can control all L'Isle-Adams! Zero can control all autonomous AIs! Zero is a program that was sealed within the virtual artificial dimension. That is the identity of the very first demon king. And I have already given Zero a body! I can tell Zero what to do!"

2V continued to laugh.

Hiroshi's expression changed as he listened.

"So that chaos outside is because of this!?"

"What? What's going on outside?"

Lily punched a doll away and turned around.

"The cars are stopped, a flying bus crashed, and I can hear sounds of destruction from all over," replied Hiroshi.

Lily turned back to 2V with a terrifying look on her face.

"You're using the L'Isle-Adams to destroy the city, aren't you!?"

"Ha ha ha! That wasn't my doing! While I can give orders, Zero can be a bit crazy! Now, I will be leaving."

"Wait!"

"What kind of idiot would wait just because you told them to?"

2V prepared to jump from the balcony while the doll held her, but she

suddenly turned around.

"Oh, right. I may have threatened you by saying the students inside were hostages, but that was a lie. I can't interfere like that from outside. Remember that."

Lily's face reddened with anger.

"Damn you! How dare you mock me like that! Get back here!"

"I hope I never see you again. Do your best to survive here. Or maybe it would be better if you didn't survive. After all, the world might be ruled by L'Isle-Adams before long."

The doll holding 2V then disappeared from outside the window.

"2V!!!!" shouted Lily.

However, she was surrounded and could not move. She turned to Hiroshi with a pained expression.

"Do something! You're a guy, aren't you!?"

"B-but..."

Hiroshi took a few unsteady steps backwards, but one of the dolls approached him.

"O-oh, no..."

He started to run, but he suddenly felt a slight prickling pain on his wrist.

"Eh?"

He looked down at his wrist and saw the bracelet he wore as a protective charm. It had originally been a device to call in an anti-demon king combat suit, but it had lost its ability to function.

—Wh-why? Does this mean I can use it again!?

"B-Brave."

Hiroshi muttered the activation keyword.

Akuto appeared in the schoolyard he had originally disappeared from.

The students who had already returned were shocked to see the blood covering him.

"Wah!"

"Why is he covered in blood?"

The students had hated him, but they could not ignore the fact that he had been stabbed in the stomach.

"Can anyone heal him?"

"You're kidding. Didn't he have monstrous strength?"

A stir filled the schoolyard.

After a short time lag, Keena and the others appeared in the schoolyard.

"A-chan!"

Keena ran over to Akuto first and embraced his head.

"Now that I've returned, I can heal myself with my internal mana. I should be fine," said Akuto in a pained voice.

"Now that we are here, we can use the healing tools the L'Isle-Adam has, right?"

Fujiko looked around. They seemed to have appeared where they had been originally, so the only other ones of the final group in the schoolyard were Akuto, Keena, Junko, and Korone.

Keena continued calling out to Akuto.

Junko was clearly flustered as she stood next to Akuto with a pale face.

Korone was standing still.

Fujiko called out to her.

"Korone-san? Did you hear me? Heal him."

As always, Korone was expressionless. However, she seemed to have heard Fujiko because she reached into the bag she always carried.

"Yes. Hurry up and bring out your healing set."

Fujiko looked back toward Akuto.

"You will be healed soon, so-..."

Fujiko heard an ominous click behind her.

"Click?"

She turned around.

Korone held a giant weapon at her waist. It was a beam weapon that

fired mana.

"Wait. That is not your healing set," said Fujiko.

Korone was obviously not listening.

"Your expression is always hard to read, but this time-..."

Korone aimed the beam weapon at Akuto.

"Watch out!" cried Fujiko.



She fired a mana sphere at Korone, but Korone ignored it and fired the beam weapon.

"You're...kidding...!"

After hearing Fujiko's voice and the sound of the mana sphere being fired, Junko turned around and noticed what was happening. However, she was an instant too late.

Korone's weapon fired a beam of light which pierced through Akuto's body.

"Gh!" groaned Akuto.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto!"

Keena and Junko cried his name at the same moment.

Fujiko's mana sphere struck Korone directly on the face, but it only knocked her to the side a bit. Korone began aiming the weapon once more.

"Wh-what are you doing, Korone!?"

"Stop, Korone-chan!"

Junko and Keena cried out again.

But Korone's expression did not change. Flames could be seen beginning to spread through the city visible behind Korone's back.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

This is Volume 7. I wrote it as the beginning of a new chapter. This begins a multi-volume story. I haven't decided if it will end next volume or if it will continue for longer than that. I think it is fun to have things progress as the characters dictate, so I will let them drag around in this. I hope you can enjoy this as a serialized story.

Now for the expansion into other media. A second Drama CD has been confirmed and is set to be released September 30th, 2009 by Beatniks Inc. The new characters to focus on there are Lily Shiraishi voiced by Kanda Akemi-sama and Teruya Eiko voiced by Satou Satomi-sama. You readers know what kind of person Teruya Eiko is and I am looking forward to how that will turn out.

Also, Volume 1 of Itou Souichi-san's manga version has been released by Akita Shoten, and it is still being serialized in Champion RED. When I asked him about his future plans for the manga, I was left saying "Eh!? That's going to happen!? Wow!" The end point may be the same, but the route taken is different, so I recommend it even if you have read the novels.

Now then, time for a pointless discussion.

I had some motsunabe the other day. It was amazingly good, but the timing with which to swallow the intestines always troubles me. You can

only chew them 3/4 as much as your average food. But I never want to swallow it too soon, so I try to chew it too much and end up chewing forever. I wouldn't have a problem if there was some standard number of times to chew the intestines. That or a surefire method of chewing through the intestines.

Whether it's roasted or in a nabe, I await the answers from intestine lovers across the country.

Finally, my thanks.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. Thank you for visiting me after I moved. Stop by again any time.

I give my thanks to my editor Ohashi-san. I feel I have grown a bit because I was only a little bit late for the deadline this time, but I also get the feeling it was a one-time thing. I will be aiming at speeding up from now on, too.

Also, I give my thanks to those involved with the Drama CD and everyone else. I will keep doing my best, so please stick with me.

Now then, Volume 8 is next. It will continue where this one ended. We should be able to enjoy this for a lot longer!

The cover features three anime-style characters. At the top left is a girl with long purple hair and brown eyes, wearing a purple and white outfit, with her hand near her mouth. Below her is a boy with spiky dark hair, wearing a dark cape and a red shirt, with a wide, toothy grin. At the bottom is a girl with dark hair, looking upwards. The background is filled with orange flames and purple energy waves. The title 'いちばんうしろの大魔王' is written in large, stylized characters, with '大魔王' in red and 'いちばんうしろ' in blue. Below the title is 'ACT8' in yellow and red. The author's name '水城正太郎' is at the bottom right.

いちばんうしろの大魔王
ACT8

水城正太郎



「二番最初から語らなくてはなりません」
加寿子が口を開いた。



「魔王とは、人間であって、人間でないものです」



「ちい！」
2Vはマナ球を複数個、
身体の周囲に展開し、
これ操ろうと手を動かした。

「おおおおー！」



登場人物紹介

はっとりちゃんこ
服部 絢子

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

さいあくど
紗伊 阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると(再び?) 予言された「善良な」主人公。初代魔王ゼロの復活にどう出るのか?

えとうふじこ
江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。魔獣ケルベロスに騎乗する。

そが
曾我 けーな

阿九斗に懐いている天然少女。お米が大好き。果たしてその正体は……?

みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。しかしゼロと2Vによりコントロールを奪われてしまう。



き た よ し え
木多淑恵

.....
2Vに騙され、ゼロ復活の一因を作ってしまう。阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。



し ら い し
リリィ白石

.....
コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。嘘嘩っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。



2V

.....
内閣魔術情報調査室、CIMO8の一人。ゼロを甦らせて、その力を操ることに成功する。



けいす

.....
ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄な少女。ゼロに対する何らかの力ギを握っているようだが？

Prologue

In this empire, the emperor had no power.

The emperor merely prayed for the imperial citizens while living in a splendid palace built within a forest in the center of the imperial capital.

Even so, the historical emperors had been loved by the people and the current empress, Kazuko, was especially adored. She maintained the beautiful appearance of an innocent young girl using special treatments and yet she had perfected her elegant behavior. She always smiled and wisdom could be felt in her every word.

Even if Kazuko had no political authority, she still held some sway. The imperial citizens would act if she spoke. For that reason, she was limited to speaking harmless things in public and her private life was carefully removed from the public eye.

As a result, Kazuko had several secrets. Some of them were trivial and others were quite major, but the largest of them was not even known by the generations of high priests that had come and gone. The only ones who currently knew this secret were the highest ranking members of the imperial guards and a single girl.

The secret was that Kazuko had a twin sister. This twin was of course the girl who knew the secret.

The imperial family had a number of strange traditions. One of those dealt with the birth of twins. The right of succession was taken from the

twin born first and she was instead raised in secret as a body double for her younger twin. Those serving the emperor had faithfully obeyed this custom and Kazuko's sister had been raised in a hidden part of the palace.

She was not given a name because she was to be a second Kazuko.

"If I'm Kazuko, then who is she?"

While hugging the doll she had been given as a toy, the girl had looked into a bright room of the palace. She had seen a girl who looked exactly like her. This other girl had been sitting before a toy-like desk and learning how to read and write from a teacher.

"She too is Kazuko-sama," was the reply the artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam had given her.

"Why can't I talk to her?"

"Because that is the rule."

"Why can't I learn like she does?"

"You will soon learn the same things. However, that can be easily accomplished with a machine, so you do not need to work at it."

"Oh. So I have it easy. It must be tough being her."

The girl had smiled then, but she came to understand many different things as she grew up. She eventually realized just how unnatural a situation she was in.

The girl would periodically have the memories of Kazuko the empress inserted into her head. She lived without ever doubting she was Kazuko, but the real Kazuko was a different girl who was only allowed to look on from afar. It was a bizarre feeling no one had ever experienced before.

The girl grew horribly confused over who she was.

She was also forbidden to interact with anyone except for a very small number of L'Isle-Adams. When she tried to leave the secret room that hid her from everyone else, those L'Isle-Adams would always find her and take her back.

The girl had never spoken with a human before, but Empress Kazuko interacted with many different people in the palace. Those memories were implanted into the girl, so she knew the rulers of the world and the high priests quite well. On the other hand, none of them knew she existed.

The girl had no one who could prove to her who she was. The L'Isle-Adams were no help at comforting her on that point. They were unable to answer the true question she was asking.



Even so, the girl could not go mad or commit suicide. She was forcibly given the greatest medical care available. Her mental stability was maintained with drugs and her body was almost entirely altered to give her the same extremely long lifespan as Kazuko.

That life continued for much too long and the girl eventually just stopped thinking about who she was.

She existed in the shadows where no one ever looked.

She was the opposite of Kazuko who lived in the light.

Instead of thinking logically about the issue, she chose to take in that perception of herself as a part of her body. Once she did, she ceased to view herself as human. She felt as if she were similar to a ghost.

She viewed the world from above as an invisible ghost no one could see. She simply observed the things around her while feeling removed from reality herself. She poured everything she observed into her head as data. That was the girl's everyday life.

However, her life reached a turning point when her magic training began. To match her physical growth, Kazuko began training in magic. The girl who saw herself as a ghost also took this training, but a difference in personality produced a distinct difference between the magic they learned. Kazuko learned almost all magic with ease, but the girl showed little talent. However, she showed startling progress when learning the secret magic passed down by the imperial family. This magic allowed one to possess multiple objects with one's mind, so her ghost-like mindset may have aided her.

She grew obsessed at polishing her skills in this unique magic. Eventually, she learned that uniqueness held great power. She could remotely control normal tools and she could control a supposedly conscious L'Isle-Adam if it was one at a time.

Her guards were entirely made up of L'Isle-Adams, so she could now leave whenever she wished.

This realization was a pleasant surprise. She began to think about what would make an appropriate end for her life in that palace, but her joy vanished in only a few minutes.

She had realized she did not know what she would do.

She was no one and she was not even human, so she had not been given a proper role. And since she could become anyone she wanted by possessing dolls and L'Isle-Adams, it was already impossible for her to face another person with her true personality on the surface.

Her mindset had changed when she had viewed the outside world with a doll body and had discovered a strange man. There was no past data for this man. He too was "no one". Even so, he was oddly knowledgeable and had somehow managed to arrive at the top of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office.

The girl had decided to contact him. Not because she was interested in his work but because she was interested in him.

The man went by the name Yamato Bouichirou.

The girl had honestly told him her circumstances and Bouichirou had earnestly replied.

On that day, the girl had decided to leave. She joined the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office and she moved from her hiding place in the palace to an apartment.

From that point on, she had her own name.

That name was 2V.

Chapter 1: A New God?

Soon after the students returned from the virtual alternate dimension, Constant Magic Academy was filled with chaos. Korone, the L'Isle-Adam supposedly sent as Sai Akuto's observer, had suddenly shot Akuto.

She had pulled a beam weapon from the bag she always carried with her. The narrow laser fired from it had been powerful enough to slice a human body in two, so she had obviously intended to kill him.

And Akuto had already been injured. He had been near death after the attack from Zero in the virtual alternate dimension where he could not use his recovery ability. Attacking him then was further proof that this was not one of Korone's bad jokes.

The students there stood in shock at the sudden turn of events. Everyone had noticed the change that had come over Korone, but it was also obvious the change went well beyond just Korone. Black smoke was rising from the distant city.

"It looks like all of the L'Isle-Adams in the city are out of control, too," muttered one student as he checked a news bulletin on his student handbook.

"Then..."

Everyone turned toward Korone. They slowly began moving away from her.

While still holding the beam weapon, Korone slowly walked through the

path the students had made. She walked toward Akuto who lay collapsed on the ground. Soga Keena and Etou Fujiko who were pressed up against him looked surprised at Korone's approach.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"S-stop this, Korone-chan..."

But their words did not seem to get through to Korone. She continued forward with the barrel of her weapon turned toward Akuto.

"I cannot kill a human. Please move."

Keena was trying to cover Akuto with her own body which seemed to stop Korone from firing.

Fujiko's expression stiffened when she heard her words.

"It seems she has not gone completely out of control."

"Then is someone controlling her?" asked Keena.

However, no one there could give an answer.

Korone silently walked up to Fujiko and the others and stopped while staring down at them.

"H-hey. If you can talk, can you tell us why you're doing this?" asked Keena in a trembling voice.

Korone put the weapon away in her bag.

For an instant, Keena smiled.

"Th-thank goodness..."

But then Korone spoke.

"I am doing this so that I can eliminate the current demon king."

Keena was left speechless.

Korone then pulled a long stick-shaped object from her bag.

Fujiko's face stiffened in fear when she saw it. It was obviously a weapon used in close quarters combat. It was essentially a sword with a blunt rod in place of the blade.

"This is a stun stick. Anyone who resists can be non-lethally eliminated with this. I do not advise resisting."

Korone stroked the stun stick with her hand and an electric current ran through it.

"So I have to do this one way or another," muttered Fujiko as sweat flowed down her brow.

Fujiko had fought Korone in the virtual alternate dimension even if it had been a game, so Fujiko knew firsthand what kinds of superhuman movements Korone was capable of.

"We might be in trouble here..."

The situation was almost completely hopeless. None of the students outside of Fujiko and the others would even try to oppose Korone. The most reliable one of them in close quarters combat would be Hattori Junko, but Fujiko could see her standing still in utter shock.

"If we had some kind of opening, we might be able to manage something..."

Fujiko tried to search for an opening in Korone's movements, but Korone of course did not let her guard down as she walked.

"If you do not move, I will eliminate you."

Korone swung down the stun stick.

"No!"

Keena clung to Akuto's body. Fujiko closed her eyes, thinking it was all over.

But in that instant, a tremendous vibration filled the air.

"What is that?"

Noticing the oddity, Fujiko looked up.

Korone had stopped moving and she was vibrating.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..."

She had completely frozen in place while producing a voice similar to a broken recording device.

Fujiko had no idea what had caused this, but it was the opening she needed.

"Cerberus!" she called.

A demonic beast rushed toward the schoolyard. It was a giant dog monster with three heads. Ever since Fujiko had altered it so it would do what she said, she had grown quite fond of it.

As the beast ran over, it used one mouth to toss Akuto onto its back. Keena refused to let go of Akuto, so she was flung onto its back as well.

Fujiko climbed onto the Cerberus's back and noticed Junko had yet to

come to her senses. Fujiko ordered the beast to place Junko on its back as well before running from the courtyard where the other students were standing in shock.

"Hyah!"

Junko finally regained her senses when the giant dog used its mouth to toss her onto its back. She turned to Fujiko and asked a question.

"Senpai, what do we do now?"

"We can only run away. We need to know more about the situation. All I can say for now is that Korone has probably gone nuts due to that 'original demon king' that attacked in the virtual alternate dimension."

Fujiko had the Cerberus run away from Korone.

"H-hey, where are we going? No matter how strong A-chan is, he still needs time to recover," said Keena worriedly.

"We have no choice. Now that this has happened, I have to bring him to the hidden village of the black magicians."

Fujiko may have sounded reluctant, but she had intended to do this eventually.

"Hidden village?" repeated Keena in surprise.

"Yes. It is the home of the black magicians I have secretly been in contact with. It is out in the country a bit, but that makes it easier to hide."

"Senpai, you make it sound like you accept that he is the demon king," protested Junko.

"Of course I do," said Fujiko as if doing anything else was foolish.

Junko looked confused.

"But that is not what is best for him."

"This is not the time for that. If all of the country's L'Isle-Adams are being controlled, then the entire country will be taken over."

It appeared Junko could not come up with anything to say in response.

"The only ones who can oppose that are the black magicians who have rebelled against the country," added Fujiko with a grin. She then looked behind the Cerberus. "Also, it seems we do not have time to discuss it."

Korone had recovered and she was smoothly pursuing them.

"Kh... But either way, I can hardly go to a village of black magicians," said Junko reluctantly.

She looked back and forth between Akuto's unconscious face and the scene behind them. But after looking at Akuto a few times, a sorrowful look filled her face. Having made up her mind, she jumped down from the Cerberus's back.

"I will stop Korone!"

"If you get separated now, I will not tell you where the hidden village is!" cried Fujiko as Junko grew more distant.

But Junko did not turn back.

"Please hurry up and leave!"

Junko held up her sword.

Korone smoothly approached her.

"Yah!"

With a short cry, Junko went on the attack.

But in no time at all, Korone's stun stick jabbed into Junko's gut. The sharp sound of electricity rang out.

"Gh!"

Junko let out a short groan and passed out.

Korone's merciless attack caused Keena to cry out in surprise from the Cerberus's back.

"No matter how serious she was, the normal Korone-chan would make a joke here!"

Even as she instantly took out Junko, Korone gave no dry comment and instead continued pursuing the Cerberus.

She moved faster than the Cerberus could run, so she quickly caught up.

"I will make sure I can resist you at least some this time!"

Fujiko swung her hand to use magic.

However, she stopped in confusion.

She could not focus mana in that hand.

"What!? My magic..."

"You can't use it?" cried Keena in surprise.

"Has this situation affected the gods too?" speculated Fujiko just as

Korone jumped up.

She dropped toward them from the air with the stun stick held out.

"In that case...!"

Fujiko decided to use the code for the black magic that was not controlled by the gods. She focused on activating it, but Korone's attack was too quick.

"I won't make it in time!"

Fujiko's eyes opened wide with fear, but the same phenomenon from before came over Korone.

Her body began vibrating and she dropped from the air as if she had fallen unconscious.

"Again? I'm not about to complain, but what is that?"

As Fujiko spoke her question aloud, the Cerberus suddenly slowed its pace.

"What is it?"

Fujiko looked forward and Keena pointed ahead of them.

"There's someone there."

A single girl stood atop a hill away from the academy in the direction the Cerberus was headed. She held something box-shaped in her hands.

"Who is that?"

Fujiko prepared herself for an attack, but the girl waved her hand as if she recognized Fujiko and the others.

"You're Etou Fujiko-san, right? If you're going to flee, can you take me with you? I'll explain the situation later," said the girl sociably.

Fujiko was of course suspicious, but her mouth opened in shock when she heard what the girl, Kita Yoshie, said next.

"I'm sure you find this surprising, but we've met before. I was Yoshihiko in the virtual alternate dimension."

"So that's it."

Fujiko nodded in understanding and let Yoshie on the Cerberus. She then turned to the box-shaped object the girl held. It had something like an antenna attached with a cord and Yoshie turned it toward Korone.

"This is an attachment for the virtual alternate dimension creator I made. When the device activates, it creates a barrier by vibrating the mana in the air, so I can use this to give that barrier directionality,"

explained Yoshie.

"In other words, you can vibrate the mana in the direction the antenna is pointed to keep someone from moving?"

Yoshie nodded.

"Exactly. It seems the gods aren't giving permission to use magic, but machines like this can still manage. This is all I can rely on. However, I can only use it in short bursts or it will overheat, so it'll only buy us some time," complained Yoshie.

"Not to worry," said Fujiko with a smile. "I will make sure we escape in the opening that creates. And even without that machine, I can use magic unconnected to the gods. I can use black magic."

"Fwoh! That's great. Please do."

Yoshie clapped her hands together and Fujiko grinned.

"You make it sound easy. It is actually quite difficult. ...Bring the darkness of my heart into the world!"

While Fujiko chanted those words to focus her mind, a dark aura surrounded her body.

No, it only looked like an aura. It was actually black mana. The surrounding mana was being used to distort the light and cut off one's

vision.

That dark curtain of mana spread out and covered the area about 100 meters around them.

"We can use this chance to hide in the mountains behind the school," said Fujiko in a satisfied tone.

"Amazing. I'm really impressed," cheered Yoshie.

Fujiko looked at her and shrugged.

"Your personality is a lot different than it was in the virtual alternate dimension."

"Oh, that was roleplaying. I was just trying to act like the guys in otome games."

"Otome games? You mean those games where beautiful boys tease the player?"

"Oh? Do you play them?"

"No, I do not. But I suppose you would be that kind of person if you created that game. ...Wait, that does not matter. Can you explain the situation?" asked Fujiko.

As Fujiko and the others began their flight, a single land car was driving through the center of the imperial capital. After escaping Lily Shiraishi's attack, 2V had arranged for another CIMO 8 member to pick her up.

The man in the driver's seat let out a falsetto cry of surprise.

"Twins!?"

He was a quiet-looking middle-aged man. He wore glasses and the lab coat of a researcher. From his appearance, one would assume not much would elicit such an exaggerated reaction from him, but what he had just been told was one of those few things.

"Yes. I am Kazuko's twin," said 2V with a grin.

She looked like a sickly skinny girl, but if that was true, she would have to be quite old. However, it did not seem she was lying or that she had gone insane. If 2V's face had held any color at all and she was brought up to a healthy weight, she would look exactly like Empress Kazuko.

The man in the driver's seat, Kento, had interacted with 2V in the past, but this was the first time he had seen her true face.

"Does no one know about this?"

"No one but the parties concerned. Oh, and the head of the imperial guard might know. I wanted to make sure I never returned to the palace.

Almost no one knew in the first place, but I made sure to erase the memory from the doctors' minds. It was a real pain," said 2V as if it barely concerned her.

"Was it done so the twins wouldn't fight over succession?"

"No. This seems to be the tradition. One of the twins is raised as a body double. That's just how the imperial family does things. I was trained for that role and gained the abilities I have now. Until the day I was scouted by CIMO 8's currently missing leader and fled the palace, I lived for the sake of this empire. Ah ha ha..."

2V laughed loudly.

"Is that why you resurrected Zero, the first demon king?" asked Kento in disgust as he looked out the window.

The cityscape visible there was still in the middle of a disaster. Smoke rose here and there between the buildings, flying cars had crashed to the ground, and land cars had run off the roads.

That was what happened when every single L'Isle-Adam temporarily malfunctioned. In the modern day, everything from driving to manual labor was almost entirely handled by L'Isle-Adams. Kento could not even imagine how many small accidents had occurred in factories and the like.

"Zero can control all L'Isle-Adams, so he's the perfect partner for me. This chaos is only temporary. I've already regained control, so these disasters will not spread any further."

"So you had me prepare that vessel for Zero in order to end this chaos. I'm going to ask you again: what exactly is Zero?"

"The very first L'Isle-Adam and the very first demon king. However, he was more an artificial intelligence than an artificial human. He was created to manage mankind."

"...So he came before the gods," muttered Kento.

In the sense that he was an artificial intelligence created to manage mankind, he was the same as the current gods.

"Zero was meant to maximize mankind's happiness, but for some reason, he concluded wiping out humanity would best achieve that goal."

"Why?"

"I can give him an interview now, so maybe I'll ask him later. I'm going to be busy for a while though, so it will have to wait. At any rate, Zero's problems were fixed and the gods were quickly made. That led to the very first demon king war."

"So that's how the demon king and gods fought for the first time."

"It was actually a fight between L'Isle-Adams and human magic. The fight was on a fairly small scale, but Zero was ultimately sealed."

"Why didn't they destroy him?"

"That's the thing. To put it simply, Zero is the supporting pillar of their thoughts. If they lose Zero, they will likely no longer be able to exist."

"So it all starts with Zero, is that it?"

"He is also the first L'Isle-Adam, so Zero really is the foundation of our current society. Still, a tool is nothing more than a tool. That's why I can control him. That makes me the strongest existence in the world right now. Oh, sorry. I suppose we usually think of 'strongest' as referring to CIMO 8's Codename USD."

2V's face twisted in a smile.

Kento was the Codename USD in question. However, Kento showed no sign of feeling any emotion over those words. He merely adjusted the position of his glasses and spoke.

"In other words, you are starting a rebellion."

"No, I am taking on a new identity. From now on, I will be Kazuko. I think I'll see what it's like ruling as empress."

Kento glanced over at 2V. A look similar to killer intent could be seen behind his glasses.

"I know you are not the obsessively ambitious type, so why are you

doing this?"

2V returned his look with the eyes of a lifeless girl. Only the very corner of her mouth turned up in a grin.

"If I gave a boring answer here, you would become my enemy, wouldn't you? But you know you'll enjoy what I'm doing here. I want to prove that everyone but me is crazy. A lovely experiment, don't you think?"

A truly rational smile covered the face of that girl with sunken cheeks. That combined with her lifeless eyes, would have made anyone think she was the crazy one. However, that expression and her words were actually both calculated and restrained.

Kento opened his mouth a bit and then closed it. That was how much this had surprised him.

"Everyone but you?"

"Yes. Everyone in the world. Once I become empress, I will make them all go crazy with just a few words. However, I believe that this will actually save the world. How about we tear away all the false civility? I want to show them just how much they all desire chaos and violence."

2V laughed.

"I see. I can't help you with that, but I will watch you. If you can pull it off on such a large scale, then do it. I look forward to seeing if you prevail or if some sane person prevails," said Kento as he stopped the car.

2V opened the door to find the park entrance to the palace. She got out and a great number of L'Isle-Adams lined up. They all worked in the palace. Some were male, some were female, and they were all dressed as official servants. They greeted their new master, 2V, in an orderly fashion.

The splendid palace in that nature-filled area at the center of the city was now 2V's.

"Did you capture Empress Kazuko?" 2V asked a nearby L'Isle-Adam.

"No, Her Majesty was absent," replied the L'Isle-Adam.

"Do you mean she ran away?"

"Yes, but she is alone. All the others in the palace have been restrained."

"I see. When I enter the palace, they might think the empress has returned. Well, even if they find it suspicious, they'll have no choice but to treat me as the real one in this situation."

With a mocking laugh, 2V looked up at the top of the palace.

A strange sight could be seen there.

An object was floating there. It was almost a sphere, but it had exactly 20 edges that formed corners. Its diameter was twenty meters long. It looked halfway between being transparent and silver, but its slimy-

looking metallic surface reflected the surrounding scenery and emitted too much light to look directly at it.

That was Zero's body.

"So that holds a god's body within a virtual alternate dimension. You sure made a luxurious home for him."

2V turned toward the car and waved.

Kento lightly raised his hand in response and drove off.

2V walked alongside the row of L'Isle-Adams and looked back up at Zero.

She was currently controlling Zero. That was possible because of the imperial family's magic that she had been taught. The single type of magic she was able to use had given her this absolute power.

And 2V gave a loud order to Zero without speaking.

Suddenly, a giant image appeared in the air above the splendid palace. It was an image of Kazuko.

Of course, it was not the real Kazuko. It was an image produced by Zero. However, it looked and sounded exactly the same as the real one. This Kazuko spoke the words 2V spoke.

"I am saddened by the recent accidents," began Kazuko.

The image was being transmitted all across the empire.

2V began by honestly announcing that the chaos had been caused by Zero. She explained what Zero was and what his ability was. She then worked to convince the people that they should not oppose Zero.

The gods had ceased to function. That meant the people could not use magic. On top of that, all of the L'Isle-Adams were under Zero's control. She told them they should do what he says.

Essentially, she was announcing the empress's surrender.

Once the surrender was complete, 2V had her words transmitted in Zero's voice. An inhuman and frightening male voice reverberated throughout the empire.

"The gods are dead. But that is not a problem. Cast aside your magic. I will use the L'Isle-Adams to serve all of you. And in so doing, I shall rule over an empire of eternal happiness. I am the new god."

Zero (aka 2V) finished the announcement.

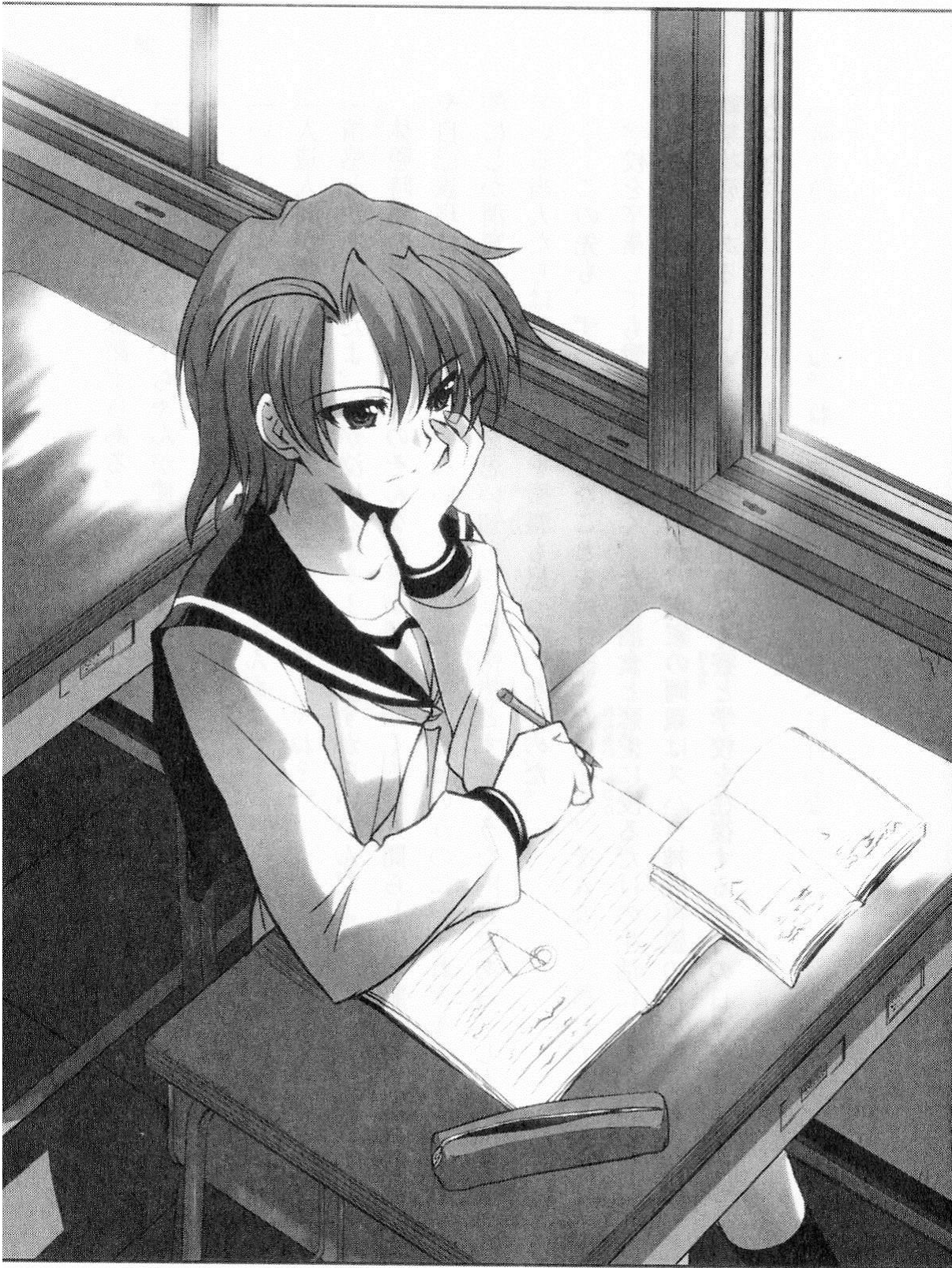
2V gave a loud laugh and passed through the palace gate.

In that moment, the empire fell under 2V's control.

One week had passed since the sudden change to the empire. There had of course been great chaos in that time, but the people had quickly grown used to their life without magic.

All public services were carried out by L'Isle-Adams. The churches where the gods were worshiped were done away with and the priests lost their jobs. The knights were redistributed underneath L'Isle-Adam bosses and they acted on the orders of those bosses. Almost every corporation was placed under the management of L'Isle-Adams. There was of course massive unemployment.

However, losing one's job did not lead to hardship. Almost all of the production needed to keep society running was carried out by L'Isle-Adams, so people no longer had to labor. Everyone gained a decent income without doing anything.



—I would never have guessed this would feel so empty.

Junko absentmindedly thought while sitting in one corner of a classroom.

Constant Magic Academy was gone. The students who still wanted to attend school had been transferred to normal schools. Most of the students had chosen to continue their schooling, but they had been distributed to different schools in order to keep them from forming too large a group.

Junko was now living a normal life among unfamiliar students.

—Normal?

She questioned the term she herself had used. It did seem this had been normal long ago. One attended classes with no real objective in mind and memorized only the knowledge needed to not obstruct society in the future. However, she was mostly being forced to gain the patience to obediently sit still during class. Being obedient was what mattered most. In the society that had arrived a week earlier, a mistake could lead to the L'Isle-Adams no longer bringing you food. Simply "not thinking" had become a lot more important.

However, none of the students around her had chosen to study magic in the past. Some of them even welcomed this society.

"I bought the guitar Myou-chan used on TV yesterday."

"You moron. You shouldn't let her influence you so much."

"What's wrong with it? I'll be popular if I learn how to play it."

“The L’Isle-Adams can play any song more accurately, so what’s the point?”

“Don’t forget about emotion. I just have to learn how to make girls cry with my guitar.”

Junko could hear the boys talking during the break. They realized that the only “human” activities left were the arts and self-expression, but she could not believe they would waste their efforts on trying to be popular. Of course, those boys would not agree with her at all.

—This will just repeat without end from here on... Anyone can tell that.

Once they graduated, they would not need to work. They would live a life of alcohol, food, and romance. She could not currently contact them, but her parents had been stopped from reconstructing the temple of Suhara and were currently in a state of pseudo house arrest. Junko herself had begun a life of going back and forth between her dorm and school with no real purpose.

“You look sad. How about we go eat parfaits after school?” asked Korone.

She spoke so brightly one almost forgot how she used to ask. She actually had an expression on her face, she did not wear her uniform properly, and she acted like any normal girl.

“No, thanks,” replied Junko with a stiff expression.

She still could not get over how wrong it all felt. Korone was now a popular member of the class and she helped create the class's bright and cheerful mood.

"You'll never be popular like that. You're wasting that cute face of yours," said Korone jokingly.

Junko had repeatedly asked Korone to return to her old personality, but it was no use. Junko was now the weird one in the class.

"I promised to meet my little sister today. But that does not matter. How about you return to how you used to be?"

"How I used to be? I've always been like this. And if you keep saying these weird things, you might get arrested. I hear there are a lot of people getting arrested for antigovernment activities."

Korone then dashed back over to her friends. Junko did not overlook the strangely eerie look in her eyes as she left.

There were indeed rumors of people opposing the L'Isle-Adams' control. Junko had even seen posts on the internet recruiting likeminded people. However, those had disappeared in less than a day.

—This might be a really bad situation.

Junko felt a vague unease.

After school, she headed to where she had promised to meet her sister Yuuko. She walked toward the clock at a street corner near her school.

Yuuko worked in the entertainment industry as an idol, so she was well-known. She was currently wearing a hat to disguise herself somewhat, but Junko was more surprised by the person standing next to her.

"Hiroshi!" cried Junko in surprise.

Miwa Hiroshi raised a hand in greeting with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Hey. For some reason, it's kind of embarrassing seeing you again now."

"You were not around during that commotion. Where have you been?"

"He transferred to my school," explained Yuuko in his place.

Yuuko looked delighted.

—Come to think of it, they did get along oddly well.

Junko felt an odd sense of understanding as she looked at the two of them together.

"Fine, but wouldn't it be bad if someone saw you with him?" said Junko in a slightly teasing tone.

Yuuko laughed, but Hiroshi grew terribly flustered.

"P-please give me a break, class rep."

"Ah ha ha ha. Hiroshi-kun, it's fine, so don't worry about it. I don't mind at all."

"You should mind at least some," said Junko.

"Th-that's right. You're famous."

Hiroshi still looked nervous.

"No, it's not a problem. The industry has gotten a little weird recently," pouted Yuuko.

"Really?"

"Yeah. There's some kind of pressure or something. I'm not sure how to put it, but it isn't fun. What I say is decided ahead of time, there's more and more I'm not allowed to sing, and I can't choose anything for myself."

As Yuuko began to complain, Hiroshi frantically pushed at the two sisters' backs.

"C-c'mon, let's go to a café. We shouldn't just stand around and talk."

They entered a random café and Junko and Yuuko got to the reason they were meeting: they had wanted to discuss their parents.

"So are father and the others okay?"

Junko could not help but lower her voice.

"Yeah. Nothing's happened to them, but it looks like we can't meet them directly any time soon. Also..."

At that point, their tea arrived and Yuuko stopped talking. The waitress was of course a L'Isle-Adam and Junko did not like how she glanced over at their faces. Junko may have just been overly sensitive, but it still bugged her.

"How far do you have to go, I wonder?" muttered Junko.

"How far?" asked Yuuko.

"How much do you have to say or do before you get arrested like in the rumors?" clarified Junko.

Hiroshi's expression grew serious, but Yuuko laughed lightly.

"Ah ha ha. Don't worry. Dad and the others are fine. Nothing's going to happen."

"R-right..."

Despite what Junko said, something about it all bothered her.

Only a week had passed, but an unpleasant aura had spread throughout the city. The people who had never used magic in their everyday lives may not have noticed as much, but a lack of freedom and an oppressiveness had definitely increased.

But what bothered her even more was how most people seemed to have no problem with it. It was the same with Yuuko. Even though their parents had been confined to their home, she was acting like it was no big deal.

"But we have definitely lost our freedom. When something is taken from you, isn't it wrong to expect benevolence from those who took it from you?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi quickly cut in.

"C-c'mon, you could also say we have more freedom now, don't you think? After all, the restrictions from the gods are gone, so we can do whatever we want. And you could say the ability to use magic was too great a responsibility for us. Also, we can get perfect scores at these normal schools without even trying. That makes school a place to just have fun with your friends," said Hiroshi with a stiff smile.

"But shouldn't we always try to improve ourselves? And given our

position, Yuuko and I may be in danger, so..."

Junko tried to dig in her heels, but Hiroshi shook his hands to cut her off.

"No, no. You aren't in danger at all."

Yuuko took Hiroshi's side.

"It'll be fine. And if anything does happen, Hiroshi-kun will protect me."

Yuuko clung to Hiroshi's arm and he shook his head while blushing.

"No, no. I have no power, so please don't do anything dangerous."

Junko felt a bit of self-loathing when she realized she found that scene somewhat irritating rather than charming.

—It has only been a week.

Only a week had passed, but that commotion felt like the distant past. While amid that chaos, she had wanted the danger and her exploding emotions to pass as quickly as possible, but she now looked back on them with sweet feelings of nostalgia.

—All of that came from him.

She thought about Akuto.

She felt she might forever regret not running away with him. If she never met him again, she certainly would.

—But he never felt that way about me...

She was aware just how much of a shock it had been to her when he had suggested she spend time with Yoshihiko. She did not want to admit it, but that had been why she had jumped down from that Cerberus's back.

—Shouldn't I have done everything I could to stay with him?

As she thought about that, she held her head in her hands and groaned.

"Are you okay?"

Yuuko's question brought her back to her senses.

"Y-yes. It is nothing. I just think you should be more cautious."

Junko cleared her throat and shook her head.

"C'mon, I know that. Just try to keep in touch." Yuuko drank the rest of her tea and turned toward Hiroshi. "You're free after this, right? There's

somewhere I want to go with you.”

“F-fine. As long as we don’t stay out too late.”

“What? We’re not little kids. Your school doesn’t have a dorm, so you live alone in an apartment, right?”

“Y-yeah, but I have something I need to do today...”

“Okay. We just can’t stay out too late today, right?”

Hiroshi and Yuuko had already begun their own conversation. Junko wanted to leave, so she stood up, causing her chair to scrape against the floor.

“How about we leave?”

“Okay. If you need something, just tell me. Make sure to watch the shows I’m on, okay?” said Yuuko.

After parting ways with Yuuko who looked delighted and Hiroshi who looked troubled, Junko returned to her dorm room and sat in that room which had nothing but the essentials.

The only entertainment came from internet broadcasts. She could communicate with others using online messages, but Junko only felt any affinity with those who used to use magic. And any political conversation would quickly be suppressed.

As she stared blankly at a news show without really watching it, she was overcome by a feeling of gradually going insane. The news was clearly more monotonous than it used to be. Criminal incidents were not reported, so the news only talked about food, sports, and other recreational activities. It was possible there really were no criminal incidents to report. Some L'Isle-Adams were not made beautiful and were truly impossible to distinguish from a human. Junko had heard those ones would prevent crimes before they were committed or arrest the criminal immediately after they were committed. If that was true, it meant people were being monitored at all times.

—I feel like I am going to go crazy being constantly watched like this.

Junko turned off the news, but then she could not bear sitting in that silent room.

—I just want to tell someone what I honestly feel.

She wondered if this was what it meant to long for human companionship, but when it came down to it, it was Akuto she wanted to talk with.

—I really do regret not going with him, don't I?

Just as Fujiko had said when they had parted ways, she might never see them again.

As she sat silently thinking that, she felt an odd itching feeling on her

face. She reached up and her finger came back wet.

—I am crying... I did not even notice...

No one was watching, but she was overcome with an intense feeling of embarrassment.

—Did I care about him that much?

At the same time, a feeling of shame lurked deep within her chest.

—I should have just been honest. Why couldn't I do that? I always try and fail on my own.

Junko looked up so as not to cry any more.

—Is it all over already?

Hiroshi had transferred to a school without a dormitory, so he lived in an apartment. However, when he returned home a bit late in the evening because of his time with Yuuko, he found a girl sharply glaring at him in his room.

She was short and a bit boyish, but her expression was that of someone used to ordering others around. She sent a stream of abusive language toward Hiroshi the second he returned.

"You're late. I was beginning to think something happened. You need to be more careful."

She was former student council president Lily Shiraishi.

After 2V had escaped from them, Hiroshi had used his power to repel the attacking dolls, but they had been forced to flee and hide because Zero had control of the gods and had taken the empress hostage. Fortunately, it remained a secret that the suit Hiroshi had been given by Yamato Bouichirou had regained its power. The suit's mana canceller had cut off the information the dolls had been sending to Zero. Lily had ended up hiding in Hiroshi's apartment.

"I can't help it. I do have a life, you know?" complained Hiroshi.

He closed the door, turned on the lights, and then froze in place.

Lily was in nothing but her underwear and sitting cross-legged on the floor. This was simply too immodest, so Hiroshi frantically looked away.

"Wait, president. You can't dress like that..."

"Stop sexualizing everything, you idiot. I'm just washing my clothes," complained Lily.

She did not seem to think of Hiroshi as a guy because she showed no sign of embarrassment.

"In that case, wear my clothes."

"I can't wear your clothes. They lack the proper beauty."

"And being half-naked is beautiful?"

"If you can't think of your own body as beautiful, it means you haven't trained it enough."

Hiroshi glanced over at Lily and tilted his head.

"Well, you aren't fat, but you aren't exactly feminine either..."

A dangerous light filled Lily's eyes when she heard that.

She stuck her right hand out while sitting on the floor. After a moment, she realized something and stood up.

"Damn. I still try to use magic without thinking."

Lily walked over to Hiroshi, stretched her back up as straight as she could, and grabbed his face with her right hand.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow..."

"Oh, shut up. There's a body type you're born with and it's hard to get away from it."

"I get it. I get it."

"Honestly. I wouldn't have chosen this combination either. If I have to share a room with a guy, I'd prefer one who's a little manlier," complained Lily as she walked away from Hiroshi.

"Like aniki?" asked Hiroshi as he rubbed his face.

He was of course referring to Akuto.

One of Lily's cheeks rose in a grin.

"Hmph. Being in that kind of situation with someone I want to kill one of these days might not be so bad."

Lily could say some surprisingly adult things given her size.

Hiroshi was unsure how to respond, so Lily changed the subject.

"Anyway, you're the only one I can rely on right now, so you need to be more of a man."

Hiroshi's face stiffened.

"I know that. We can't use magic, so my suit is the only way to fight, right?"

"Exactly. And you're the only one I can use to contact people, too. I can't leave this room, after all," said Lily as she held a handheld computer out toward Hiroshi. "Any progress on 2V's identity?"

Hiroshi transferred data from his student handbook and into the computer.

"There's only so much I can investigate, but I did secretly get some data from someone working for your dad. It seems the empress's declaration of surrender wasn't Kazuko-sama. It was a synthesized video."

"I guess the rumors that the empress's face has changed a bit are true. That's definitely a healthier-looking 2V," said Lily in a tone that said she still could not believe it.

"But even if 2V had Zero's power, she would need a blood relation to the empress to take over the palace so easily. And it would all make a lot more sense that way," said Hiroshi.

Lily folded her arms.

"True. But in that case, I can't explain how she has handled things afterwards. If I were 2V, I would kill Kazuko and kill us, but that hasn't happened yet."

"Yes. I thought we would run into trouble sooner. Kazuko-sama might

have been killed already, but if so, she should be working even harder to find you since you've seen her face."

"All she's doing is crushing any antigovernment activities and the black magicians. That would mean 2V is targeting Akuto."

"I don't get it," said Hiroshi as he thought.

"But it's convenient for us. Whatever the problem is, we just have to kill 2V to resolve it. That leaves you as our trump card. I'll put together a plan to attack the palace with the former priests, so you help me contact them."

Lily patted Hiroshi's shoulder.

He shrugged with a troubled expression.

"You just want to kill 2V. You could act cuter, you know?" complained Hiroshi.

Lily gave a smile that was hardly cute. It would have made a veteran warrior tremble in fear.

"I can be cute when I need to, but our school was shut down and my L'Isle-Adam officer Arnoul is being controlled. This is no time to be sitting around acting so foolishly."

Hiroshi took a step back.

"O-okay, I won't ask you to be cute, but could you at least not be so openly hostile to the person letting you use his room?"

"Shut up. If I did that, you'd sneak into my bed at night," declared Lily.

"President, you use most of my blankets at night, so I want to sneak into your bed for another reason... It's starting to get cold," complained Hiroshi.

"Fine. You can have one summer blanket. If you fold it over three times and wrap it around your stomach, it'll keep you warm," said Lily with odd confidence.

"Even if I didn't have any feelings for the girl, I thought living with one would be better than this..."

Hiroshi grew depressed, but Lily showed no sign of caring.

"Shut up, you idiot. If you aren't going to make dinner, go buy something at the convenience store. But don't buy two bentos. That would give away that you're feeding someone else."

Chapter 2: The Conquered Empire

"The mountains are fun. I thought I would hate the outdoors, but it fits surprisingly well with my otaku interests if I think of it like an RPG," said Yoshie in delight.

"Yeah, it is a lot like a game. You gather equipment, use it at the appropriate times, and sometimes alter or combine objects you picked up to make what you need," said Keena casually.

"The two of you should be taking this more seriously," complained Fujiko.

Two days had passed since they had entered the mountains. They were travelling by Cerberus and by foot to the black magician village Fujiko knew of, so it would take them three days to cross the mountains.

The L'Isle-Adam guards had not yet been fully in place, so they had been able to buy the camping goods and other equipment they needed. Fujiko had then used the advantage of black magic to erase all trace of their presence.

They had plenty of time to talk, so Yoshie had explained the situation to Fujiko.

However, they still did not know the secret behind Zero even after exchanging information. They had seen Kazuko's surrender while on the run, but that was all they knew. They had too little information. Also, other than 2V, they were likely the only ones concerned about Keisu's

whereabouts.

"That L'Isle-Adam named Keisu is probably the key to all this."

"Are you saying that short L'Isle-Adam we met in the virtual alternate dimension is the only one who can seal Zero?"

"Yes. Zero should be concerned about her, too."

"In that case, he will be searching for Keisu while also pursuing us."

"We need to find her before Zero, but who knows where she is."

"Yes, she entered the virtual alternate dimension a long time ago. Who can say where she would have materialized."

As they spoke, they continued their escape. Their goals were to get Akuto healed and to locate Keisu.

Akuto was still unconscious. His wounds were enough to kill any normal person and he was not doing his best, so his recovery would never get anywhere if he was not allowed to rest somewhere.

"But why did Zero try to kill Akuto-sama? If Zero is the first demon king, then I have no idea what the demon king even is anymore," said Fujiko with a tilt of her head.

"We might be looking at only the worst parts of human history, so I don't really want to think about it. If what you all told me is true, the demon king is supposed give temporary death to mankind in order to allow mankind to advance, right? It sounds like something from a legend," said Yoshie lightly.

Fujiko was gradually coming to understand that Yoshie had the personality of a cheerful mad scientist. Of course, that could also be called being an otaku.

"But Zero seems to be doing the opposite. Akuto-sama was trying to break free from destiny and head down his own path, though, so don't worry," said Fujiko.

Yoshie's eyes sparkled.

"Fwohh! That's great! Where there's a will, there's a way, is that it? He's called the demon king, but he's trying to save mankind? Ohh! You mean he worries about things like, 'Calm down, my demon king blood!'? That's so exciting."

Yoshie's carefree comment brought a weary look to Fujiko's face.

"U-um, try not to get so lost in your own world..."

Yoshie scratched her head embarrassedly.

"Yeah, I guess I am a bit obsessed with that kind of thing. Hey, I want to give our group a name. How about the Maidens of the Freezing Flame? I

think its sounds great," said Yoshie in all seriousness.

Fujiko was shocked.

—H-her tastes never developed past middle school!

"I think the freezing flame does a good job of capturing the contradiction of a demon king being a savior. And you're the cool beauty type while Keena-kun has red hair."

Yoshie was in a good mood, but Fujiko held her head in her hands.

However, Keena joined in.

"I like it! That's what we were missing!"

"N-no, we were not missing that. We were not missing that at all. A-anyway, we should arrive early tomorrow, so we need to get some rest today," said Fujiko.

However, Yoshie and Keena continued their excited conversation for some time.

Fujiko somehow managed to get to sleep, but the conversation surrounding her brought some odd terms into her dream.

—Uuh... Scorching instincts, sacrifice of gravity, solitary gale, insane

archangel, eternal moonlight...

She felt a premonition of coming troubles, but they arrived at the village the next day. The villagers recognized Fujiko and gladly welcomed them. Then again, the warm welcome may have had more to do with the villagers seeing Akuto.

"I never thought I would have a chance to see the great demon king for myself," said the villagers.

It was a small village filled mostly with farmers, so it was definitely an isolated rural area. However, the ages of the residents were all over the place. That helped drive home that this was a village of black magicians. If it was simply a depopulated village, no one from the younger generations would remain. This was a community centered on a common faith.

Fujiko and the others were to stay in the village head's house. They were given a futon to let Akuto rest in, they were served tea and snacks, and they were generally made to feel at home.

The village head was a gentle, middle-aged man. He had a wife, a small child, and a large Japanese-style house.

"This has gotten quite serious," he said while showing them a news broadcast.

The news showed no chaos of any kind in the cities. The lack of anything either meant the information was being suppressed or society

was being completely controlled.

"This is the death of freedom," muttered Fujiko with a serious expression.

The village head nodded.

"As a group dedicated to releasing the conditions on magic, this is hard to forgive. Society has regressed."

"Akuto-sama is likely our only hope, but we lack the knowledge to know what to do once he has recovered. Would you be willing to lend us your wisdom?" asked Fujiko.

The village head thought for a bit and shook his head as if to say that would be difficult.

"I know a fair bit about the history of black magicians, but not even I have heard of this first demon king that has sealed off the gods."

"Then what is different between this demon king and the other demon kings like Akuto-sama?"

"I do not know. I thought you would know, Etou-kun."

"Me?"

"Everyone here thought you knew everything about the demon king."

"No... No one knows the details. All I know is the relationship between the gods and the demon king."

Fujiko felt discouraged. At this rate, they would be forced to continue their flight while knowing nothing.

"I am sorry I could not be of more help, but I thought the demon king would have returned to the place of his birth by this point."

Fujiko raised her head.

"Eh? The place of his birth? What do you mean?"

The village head's eyebrows rose in confusion.

"It's a well-known legend. The demon king is said to have fled from the place of his birth and hid among normal children as an orphan. It is said he received various revelations while at the place of his birth."

"But Akuto-sama said he does not know where he was born."

"That is a problem because no one else does either. If only you had some clue..."

"I will search for one. I can ask Akuto-sama once he wakes up."

"Yes. Try to keep it slow. Magic is used to hide us from various sensors here and false records of the residents' lives are sent to the gods, so you are safe here."

"Thank you very much."

Fujiko gave a bow.

The village head ended the conversation there and suggested the girls take a bath. They were filthy after travelling and camping in the mountains, so they were glad to do so. The village head's wife brought them towels and they started toward the bath, but Yoshie suddenly stopped.

"Wait, I want to wipe down Akuto-kun's body before we take our bath."

The village head's wife apologized for not thinking of it and prepared another towel and a tub filled with warm water.

"Oh, but are you three going to do it? Should I call in another guy?"

"I can handle it," replied Yoshie, but Fujiko gave an even louder reply.

"Leave it to me. I always serve by Akuto-sama's side."

That was enough for the woman, but Yoshie gave a sidelong glance toward Fujiko.

"Eh? I've never seen you serve by his side."

"Hmph. I do not want to hear that from someone that does now know about the great bond between us."

Fujiko glared back and Yoshie cleared her throat.

"Well, whatever. It was my idea, so I can wipe down his body, right?"

A flash filled Fujiko's eyes.

"I do not think so. I will of course be the one to attend to him!"

"No, no. Y-you're planning to do something lewd to him, aren't you?" asked Yoshie teasingly.

Fujiko stood in front of her with a look that would have electrocuted a mouse.

"I cannot let that comment slide. I am merely ensuring Akuto-sama will be comfortable when he wakes up."

"Yes, but it was my idea."

Yoshie and Fujiko glared at each other from opposite sides of the small tub.

"Are you sure you aren't the one planning something lewd?"

"Quite sure. I was just thinking Akuto-kun would feel like he was in heaven if I wiped down his body. I guess you could call it a heavenly sensation."

"That is what you call doing something lewd!"

"No, it really isn't."

"Ugh, this is no time to be arguing over this. I just need to hurry up and wipe down his body!"

Fujiko soaked the towel in the warm water of the tub, tightly wrung it, and began to open the sliding door to the neighboring room.

"Hey, stop being so selfish. I'm going to do it."

Yoshie grabbed at the hem of Fujiko's skirt. Fujiko let out a shriek and fell to the tatami mat floor.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

While lying on her stomach, Fujiko somehow managed to look behind her. Her skirt had fallen down to knee height and her butt was sticking up into the air. Even Fujiko blushed when she realized what an embarrassing pose she was in. She fiddled with the skirt to fix it, but the hook was

broken.

"Y-you idiot, look what you've done..."

"Sorry, sorry. I guess it would be hard to appear before Akuto-kun like that. Don't worry, though. I'll go in your place."

Yoshie snatched the towel from Fujiko's hand.

"Kii!! I will not let you do this!"

Fujiko tried to grab the towel back, but grabbed Yoshie instead.

"Waaah!"

Yoshie was pulled to the floor.

"That is what you get! Now, only this door stands between my world of dreams with Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko tried to crawl forward, but Yoshie grabbed her shirt to pull her back.

"You can't go in there like that."

"Stop! Let go of me!"

Fujiko began struggling.

"I get it, but how about we both go in there and wipe him down together?"

After somehow restraining Fujiko, Yoshie suggested a compromise, but Fujiko shook her head.

"Together? I cannot allow that!"

"Eh? What's wrong with it? I'm sure it would be more fun."

"No! I cannot do anything so perverted!"

"Perverted? I'm just talking about wiping down his body."

"You really do not understand, do you? Akuto-sama and I will do all sorts of lovely things together..."

"See, I knew you were planning something lewd."

"Even if I am, you are in no position to talk! And if I leave it to you, you will only harm his body! I doubt you have ever touched a guy before."

Yoshie puffed out her cheeks as if to say Fujiko's challenge had hurt her feelings a bit.

"I may not have touched a real one, but I've simulated it more than enough times. Here, I'll prove it to you."

Yoshie held Fujiko down once more.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"I'm proving that I can wipe down his body. You're plenty dirty after all that camping."

Yoshie stuck the wet towel under Fujiko's shirt.

"Hyah! S-stop. Let go..."

"I'm only wiping down your body."

"Yes, but...ah! What was that?"

"I already told you: I'm wiping down your body. I can't rub too hard, right? That would harm your skin. I don't want to leave the skin red, so I have to be nice and gentle. Like this."

"Hyahn!"

"See? I can do it. Nee hee hee."

A laugh escaped Yoshie's lips.

Fujiko's face was flushed and she squirmed in an attempt to escape, but Yoshie wrapped her arms and legs around her and refused to let go.

"I-I get it, I get it. Please let go..."

"I can't do that. Now that I've started, I can see how dirty you are. I need to get you nice and clean before you see Akuto-kun."

"B-but it tickles... Hyah! Do you really have to undo the hook!?"

"If I don't, I can't reach everywhere. This is the most sensitive spot, so I need to be extra gentle."

"Ee! N-not there! Ahh! No...!"

Fujiko squirmed below Yoshie and she writhed even more as she tried to escape, but Yoshie's hand continued running across her body with great skill. Fujiko's entire body was flushed, she was sweating, and moans continued escaping her lips. Yoshie's breathing had grown a bit excited as she enjoyed Fujiko's reactions. But then...

"A-chan, you woke up! Thank goodness."

Fujiko and Yoshie both looked up when they heard Keena's sudden voice.

They opened the sliding door to find Keena embracing Akuto who was sitting up in the futon without a shirt on.

"Ah... I let my guard down. How could this happen?" asked Yoshie.

"Don't you dare ask that! This was all your fault!" shouted Fujiko.

Those two girls could only watch as Keena clung to Akuto.

"Another week has passed... This is going by surprisingly fast."

Lily wore the unisex shirt and underwear Hiroshi had bought her as she ate canned sardines in oil and looked through some data on her terminal.

"It's been exhausting for me," complained Hiroshi. "My suit may have a mana canceller, but it's still all over if I'm seen. Please don't work me too hard."

Another week had passed since he had started living with Lily. Hiroshi had acted on her behalf to make preparations for the resistance's plan to infiltrate the palace, but this had put a large burden on Hiroshi.

"I do feel bad asking you to do all this, but combat is harder than I thought without magic. I want to avoid any direct combat outside of the final battle between 2V and you," said Lily.

Hiroshi understood the situation, so he had no choice but to go along

with it. This did nothing to relieve his exhaustion, however.

"I know, but it's still hard..."

"You have no choice but to bear with it. You know how important this is, right? This is the only way to take back our old way of life. We're almost there. If you do a bit more work, we'll have the weapons we need. The priests and temple personnel we arm with old non-magic weapons will surround the palace. Fortunately, the palace itself is not that heavily guarded. And if a riot does break out, the knights are sure to side with the humans. Once all of that is set up, we can take action. Until then, bear with it," said Lily as if trying to warn him.

"Yes, I know. But still..." grumbled Hiroshi.

The situation had clearly grown worse from before. This was of course due to 2V's control, but that was not what taxed Hiroshi the most. He could not stand how everyone was enjoying their everyday lives amid it all.

"The way everyone is acting like nothing's wrong really makes you think. It makes me wonder if no one actually wants us to do this or if what we're doing is wrong."

"That is what those in control want. No matter how hard you tighten your grip and no matter how much you take from people, most people will react that way as long as they can't join together. There will always be more people on the side being controlled, but the reason so few people can control everyone else is not a matter of military might. It mostly has to do with a lack of connections between individuals."

"I don't like this complicated stuff," pouted Hiroshi.

"Don't say that. There's no easy way to explain this."

Lily shrugged.

The other problem weighing on Hiroshi's heart was Yuuko. And that was a problem he could not discuss with Lily.

"Hey, can I come over to play?" asked Yuuko the next day at a café.

Hiroshi had been enjoying tea with her for the first time in a while, but he was unsure how to respond to that sudden suggestion.

"U-um...well..."

He gave an incoherent answer.

He was of course delighted by the suggestion. Or rather, he was delighted she wanted to.

"Hiroshi-kun, you've been going home early so often lately, right? And we don't get to see each other very often because of your part-time job. I finally got some time off of work, so I want to see you more often. So how about I spend the night? We'll have plenty of time to talk then, right?"

Yuuko added “please”, clasped her hands together, and tilted her head. When an idol like Yuuko did it, she produced a cuteness that intensely shook Hiroshi’s heart. Hiroshi of course felt a bit dizzy, but he still could not allow her to come over.

“S-spend the night?” he repeated in a cracking voice.

“C’mon, don’t be so dirty. Don’t hope for anything like that.”

Yuuko poked at Hiroshi’s forehead.

“Ha...ha ha... I wasn’t thinking anything like that.”

Unsure what to say, Hiroshi scratched at his head.

—Where am I supposed to hide the president? No, she would never do as she was told. Then maybe I can let Yuuko-chan in on the secret? No, that would cause problems for her. Plus, I don’t know how good she is at keeping secrets. Oh, and she doesn’t know what kind of person the president is. If she finds out the president’s living with me, she’ll suspect there’s something between us.

“Ah, you’re hesitating. Don’t worry. I won’t look around for your porn magazines and videos.”

Yuuko grinned.

“Ah ha ha ha... B-but I’d still like time to clean up a bit.”

"Hm, maybe I need to rethink my position. You probably shouldn't be hiding that kind of thing when you have a girlfriend as cute as me."

Girls had a way of not realizing there was no connection between having porn and having a girlfriend, but this was no time to complain about that.

"Th-that's not the issue. U-um, you can...you can definitely come, but not today. I don't just need to clean; I need to reform the whole place. For one thing, I don't have a guest futon."

Hiroshi argued his case while waving his hands back and forth.

"Don't you think just the one futon would be more convenient?" said Yuuko with a mischievous smile.

"A-a bit...maybe."

"Then what's wrong with today?"

Yuuko was being very assertive.

Hiroshi was extremely hesitant and he knew he had to do something, but he gave in to the enthusiastic look in Yuuko's eyes and the mischievous expression on her face. He ended up saying the following.

"O-okay... But not today. Please give me a bit of time."

He grew oddly polite.

After that, he parted ways with Yuuko and took care of the job Lily had asked of him. After making sure no one was watching, he put on the Brave suit and flew high into the sky to hide among the clouds. After checking on his destination, he descended. Today's job was smuggling in a large number of weapons.

His job was to carry over a secret stash of weapons from a ship anchored out at sea. These weapons had been bought overseas and did not rely on mana. Bringing them into the empire without a proper inspection was simple enough given the powers of his suit, but it was still exhausting because he had to pay careful attention.

By the time he secretly distributed the weapons to the priests hiding in various places, night had fallen.

When he returned to the apartment and opened the door, Lily asked for a report as usual.

"How'd it go?"

"Fine. I distributed the weapons," said Hiroshi with a nod.

"Oh, good. You shouldn't have another job for a while. Now we just wait for the proper timing."

Lily was in a good mood. She walked over to Hiroshi, embraced his head, and stroked the top of his head with her hand.

"Good boy, good boy."

She had never done this before, so Hiroshi felt a bit awkward. However, he gulped when he saw how close her chest was to his face.

He had not noticed before because he had grown accustomed to it by this point, but Lily was wearing nothing but a thin T-shirt. When she did this, he could not help but notice her chest.

"Wait, president... Please let go. Even if your chest is pretty flat, if you do this..."

Hiroshi was certain Lily would let go once he said that, but she pressed him further against her chest instead.

"Ahh? How can you call this flat? Do you want to die? If I suffocate you with my chest, you won't be able to call it flat, now will you?"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that!"

"Then how did you mean it!?"

Lily pushed Hiroshi to the ground, climbed on top of him, and began rubbing his head.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow..."

"Hmph. Honestly, whenever you open your mouth, it's nothing but how exhausted you are. Well, I guess it's my fault for not helping relieve some of that. I know. How about I give you a reward? Well?"

Lily narrowed her eyes and traced her index finger down Hiroshi's cheek.

"Wait. That tickles, president."

Hiroshi blushed and sat up.

"Ah, I really don't like your attitude. Can't you react a bit more like a man? C'mon, c'mon, c'mon."

After Lily's provocative statement, she began undoing the buttons of Hiroshi's shirt, one at a time.

"Wah! Wait, you shouldn't do this, president..."

Hiroshi was afraid to push Lily away, so she ended up fully unbuttoning his shirt. He started feeling helpless and also felt a great heat welling up from the core of his body as he began blushing.

"Wait... This really is bad, president..."

"Heh heh... You're quite pure, aren't you? Ah ha ha. I'm just kidding, anyway."

Lily's expression completely changed and she smacked Hiroshi's stomach.

But at that very moment, the door opened.

"Eh?"

"Wh-what...? It can't be!"

Lily prepared to attack, but she found Yuuko fallen to a sitting position in front of the door.

"A-ah... Yuuko-chan," muttered Hiroshi blankly.

"Oh... S-sorry. I tried following you but lost sight of you, so I hid in front of your apartment waiting for you... I thought I would surprise you when you got back...but... Sorry. I shouldn't have come in..."

Yuuko covered her face with her hands.

It was perfectly understandable that she misunderstood the situation. In fact, half of it was not an understanding. They really were living together. She had just caught them at the worst possible moment.

Hiroshi grew flustered trying to figure out what to do, but Lily took swift action. She circled around and locked the door to keep Yuuko from leaving.

"Yes, well, this is a misunderstanding. Sorry. I was just teasing him a bit," said Lily after clearing her throat.

"Th-that's right. It's a misunderstanding..."

Hiroshi then began apologizing earnestly.

Yuuko had initially started crying, but she eventually grew angry. With tears still running down her face, she uttered something that did not amount to actual words and began kicking Hiroshi while still sobbing a bit.

"I-I'll explain it all...so...um...ow..."

Hiroshi grew completely pale and could find nothing to say, but Lily was still fairly calm. She began explaining the situation to Yuuko. Now that the secret was out, explaining everything was better than letting her leave.

The explanation lasted until dawn, but that may have been for the best. Yuuko had managed to calm down, so she was able to rationally accept the explanation.

Her feelings were a different matter, though.

"So there really isn't anything between you two?"

Yuuko questioned Hiroshi who was sitting with his legs beneath him.

"Yes, nothing," declared Hiroshi. "I mean, the president's body is no different from a guy's. I'm not interested in her."

"Kh..." Lily was obviously displeased, but getting angry would only complicate matters. "That's right. And I've never looked at him as a guy."

Yuuko seemed not to know how to accept that. She turned a quiet look toward Lily.

Lily was not clueless when it came to romance; she simply did not care for it. However, she did understand what it was like to be a girl. With a sour look, she nodded.

"Fine. In that case, take him with you. That's fine, right? As long as he leaves some food here, I can survive on my own," said Lily.

Yuuko silently grabbed Hiroshi's hand.

—I guess I have to go...

Normally, Hiroshi would have been delighted, but he felt awfully nervous.

"Return on the day of the attack," said Lily before seeing Hiroshi and Yuuko off.

Morning had already come.

The two of them ended up heading to Yuuko's apartment, but Hiroshi found the silence terrifying. In the hopes of truly convincing her, he continued explaining what 2V and Zero were doing.

"I get that already. I want to know what it will take for that student council president to leave your apartment," she said with a smile.

Hiroshi began to understand just how frightening girls could be.

"O-once 2V and Zero have been defeated..."

"And I'm just supposed to wait for that to happen?"

"W-well, yes. After all, I don't want you doing anything dangerous."

"Dangerous? A normal citizen like me isn't in any danger. And I have some ideas of my own," said Yuuko.

—Are you sure normal people aren't in any danger?

Hiroshi looked around the street they were walking on.

Despite being morning rush hour, there were a lot fewer people than there used to be. There should have been more people on their way to work, but those people had decreased significantly over the past two weeks.

"There are rumors that more and more people are disappearing," whispered Hiroshi.

"Some people have been moved around at work, but no one has completely disappeared. There's nothing to worry about. Even in our class, a lot of people have been briefly absent, but they've all returned," explained Yuuko.

However, Hiroshi could not help but find that creepy.

"I hope you're right..."

Hiroshi felt a blast of chilly air and he had a feeling there was more to it than the chill of the morning.

"You don't have to go to school today, right?"

Hiroshi grabbed Yuuko's hand as they approached her apartment.

She shook her head.

"No. I'm taking off school, but I have work starting at midday. It's my

first live broadcast in a while. Sorry, but you can watch me at school. I'll head there as soon as I'm done, so we can walk home together."

Yuuko let go of his hand, they brought his luggage into the apartment, and they returned to the street. However, Hiroshi headed to school while Yuuko headed to the broadcasting station.

When Yuuko waved goodbye, Hiroshi felt a horrible sense of uneasiness, but there was nothing he could do.

When he arrived at the school, everything was the same as normal. The teacher and the students were equally unmotivated. That was only natural as no one had any dreams or goals of accomplishing anything in the future. Hiroshi absentmindedly listened to the lesson while in a sullen mood.

—If you let your mind wander like this, you can easily make your way through life. Maybe that's best for everyone... Why am I forcing all this needless pain onto myself?

His thoughts ended up turning in that direction.

A bit past midday, Hiroshi pulled out a small terminal and began watching the show being transmitted to it. He was technically in class, but most of the students were doing the same. The teacher had even given tacit approval.

Yuuko was appearing on a gourmet report show. Special guests were brought on to try different foods live. Despite what had happened the

night before, Yuuko smiled broadly and acted delighted at each delicious-looking dish brought out.

—She really is a pro.

Hiroshi was impressed, but that feeling was blown away an instant later.

As Yuuko gave her thoughts on the foods, the camera zoomed in on her.

She had been smiling up until that moment, but her expression suddenly grew tense.

“I have something to tell everyone watching this.”

She sounded very resolute.

“What’s going on?”

The confusion of the other people appearing on the show was evident in their voices.

Perhaps to ensure she was not cut off, Yuuko spoke quickly but clearly.

“Don’t you think there’s something wrong with this country? It isn’t right. You need to realize we’re being controlled by violence. But if everyone raises their voice, we can change this! Don’t be afraid. Head out into the streets and talk with each other! If we can share our ideas with

each other, we can-..."

At that point, the camera quickly moved away from Yuuko.

"Cut her mic!"

"Can we switch to another show?"

The staff began frantically shouting, the others on the show muttered in confusion, and someone could be heard yelling angrily. Eventually, it all disappeared and was replaced with a commercial from some corporation.

"Eh?"

"Something weird just happened."

It seemed a lot of other people in the class had been watching that show. Confusion spread through the classroom like a ripple.

—It can't be...

Hiroshi's face grew pale.

—Was this what she meant when she said she had some ideas of her own?

Yuuko had tried to drive people to action in her own way.

However, this had of course been careless. Hiroshi did not know what would happen now, but he knew it would be nothing good.

He pulled out his student handbook and used it to send a message to Yuuko. He felt like he waited forever for a response, but he finally breathed a sigh of relief when he received a message back.

<They were really mad, but I'm fine.>

—So at the worst, she'll get fired... She shouldn't have done that.

Before classes ended, Yuuko returned to school. She had changed into her school uniform, so she must have intended on attending the last period of the day. Unfortunately, that class was almost over by the time she arrived.

"Eh heh. I couldn't help myself," she said with a more satisfied expression that Hiroshi had expected.

"You shouldn't have done that."

Hiroshi and Yuuko left the school building together.

"I'm glad nothing serious happened."

"They were really mad, but I bowed down and apologized. The industry's gotten so boring lately," pouted Yuuko.

"Yes, but after this is all over, I'm sure..."

Hiroshi trailed off.

It was only natural for other students to walk along the road with them after school, but they were acting oddly. The concentration of students around the two of them was oddly thick.

"Hm?"

"Huh? This is a little..."

Before Yuuko could say "odd", someone tapped on her shoulder from behind.

She turned around to find the school nurse.

"Hattori-san. We found a disease in your tests," said the nurse with no preamble.

"Wait. What are you talking about? I never had any tests done," said Yuuko.

"That's right. And if you did find something, shouldn't you have said

something sooner?"

As Hiroshi realized how unusual this was, the teacher cut between him and Yuuko. He had not been at this school for long, but he knew this really was the school nurse. Even so, he sensed something very dangerous in her words.

"Do not worry. She will be better soon. But it is contagious, so she needs to be quarantined."

She gestured with her hand and the students around them all moved toward Yuuko.

"Kyah! Wh-what!?"

"Stop!"

Hiroshi stepped forward to protect Yuuko, but a student behind him held him back.

"Let go!"

He gathered his strength, but the student behind him had amazing arm strength.

—A L'Isle-Adam!



Hiroshi was shocked. The people around him were definitely students and he even recognized several of them. That meant they had been living among them from the beginning.

"Don't tell me the nurse is one, too!"

Hiroshi looked over in surprise. The woman's expression remained unchanged. That settled it.

"Help!" screamed Yuuko.

Hiroshi struggled, but he could not overcome the strength of a L'Isle-Adam.

—Should I use my suit?

Hiroshi was conflicted.

If he used the suit, he could likely break free here. However, that would prevent him from playing his role in the attack on the palace.

But as he hesitated, Yuuko was being dragged further and further away.

"No! Help! Let go! Please!"

Yuuko struggled, but the L'Isle-Adams around her picked her completely up off the ground, leaving her no way of resisting.

"Wait! Stop! What are you going to do to her!?" shouted Hiroshi.

"Do not worry," replied the nurse. "We do not harm humans. She will return in a few days, so you can rest easy."

—What!?

A feeling similar to despair filled Hiroshi's chest.

People would disappear and return later. That was what Yuuko had told him. He could only think they were being brainwashed or swapped out with L'Isle-Adams.

"Stooooopppppp!"

Hiroshi activated his suit.

"Brave!"

A field appeared around Hiroshi and it blew away the L'Isle-Adam holding him from behind. An instant later, the suit was transferred in and placed around his body.

<Welcome, Brave.>

An inhuman artificial voice rang in Hiroshi's ears.

—I just doomed the attack to failure. But that just means I have to do it all myself! I'll save Yuuko and then drag 2V and Zero out of the palace!

Meanwhile, Akuto had seen the show Yuuko appeared on.

"I hope she's okay after saying that," he muttered as he watched the monitor in the village head's house.

"It is hard to say she will be," said Fujiko. "But it is clear people's discontent is building up. I hope this at least acts as a sort of trigger."

"Maybe she'll become a modern Joan of Arc," commented Yoshie who only knew Yuuko as an idol.

"Hey, what flavor of rice is that? You never said, did you?" asked Keena as she drooled on Akuto's shoulder.

Akuto had been recuperating for over a week at this point and he had stayed in the village head's house the entire time. Even so, those three girls had stayed close by his side and showed no sign of leaving. They were trying to keep each other in check and they were doing quite well on that front, but Akuto still was not sure how to handle the situation.

"What am I supposed to do about this?"

And there were other things he did not know what to do about. He had mostly recovered, so he was feeling a desire to do something. However, he did not have the slightest idea what he should do.

"You of course need to become a savior and bring peace to the world," said Fujiko. "Zero cannot take on the title of a god. Only you may be called a god, Akuto-sama."

"Ehh?" complained Yoshie. "But it doesn't look like he wants to go that far. Can't he just let the situation settle down and then live in peace?"

The corners of Fujiko's eyes rose as she began to argue back.

"That will not satisfy those who believe in him. Plus, this world has clearly grown even more mistaken than it was before. Even if he is to live in peace, he must at least do something about Zero first."

"You are right about that, but I don't like the sound of the world you black magicians want where nothing is controlled. That feels like reverting back to an older era."

"Stop deciding this on your own. Akuto-sama will be the one to decide that. Right, Akuto-sama?"

Fujiko glanced over at Akuto.

"I get the feeling I shouldn't be deciding this either," he said hesitantly.

"With power comes responsibility. You have to keep that in mind, got it?"

As Fujiko said "got it", she poked Akuto's cheek.

"Ahh, that teasing attitude seems a bit dirty. No fair."

"I wanna do it too!"

Yoshie and Keena began poking at Akuto's cheeks. The sight caused great antagonism to well up within Fujiko and she tried to touch Akuto in a bolder location.

"Out of the way, little girls. This is the time of night when the adults have their fun!"

"It's still daytime and I'd like to talk about this seriously," complained Akuto.

His lack of motivation was clear when compared to the tension filling everyone else around him. But when the village head and the other villagers saw that, they only praised him as a "great man who can remain calm at all times" or a "hero who is loved by multiple women". Everyone in the village continued seeing to his every need.

—Yuuko-chan is probably going to be in trouble now and I'm worried about Hattori-san too. She's probably fine at the moment since Yuuko-chan seemed to be doing well, but who knows what will happen now.

As Akuto thought, he slapped his knee and said "okay" while ignoring the three girls surrounding him.

"What is it?"

The three girls turned puzzled expressions toward him.

"Let's go," he said.

"Go? Are we finally going to take action!?"

"Fwoh! This is getting interesting."

"The rice here is good, but I bet the rice elsewhere is good too."

All three of them reacted differently, but none of them were opposed the idea.

"Where will be going?" asked Fujiko.

"I haven't actually decided that yet. Maybe we should try to find Keisu."

Akuto sounded much less resolute than a moment before.

"Akuto-sama, I am not so sure about that."

"This is no time to joke around."

Fujiko and Yoshie's shoulders drooped.

"Eh? I think wandering around aimlessly sounds fun," said Keena

cheerfully.

Yoshie waved her finger.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Our final objective is defeating Zero and saving everyone. It is true we need to find Keisu to do that, but we aren't strong enough to do that."

"I am aware of that, but you know what giving me power means, right?"

Akuto looked conflicted.

"It means we have you awaken as the demon king, correct? The problem is that we no longer have Peterhausen."

Fujiko went on to fill Yoshie in on the details she did not know. Peterhausen was a dragon that had existed to support the demon king and control the demon king's mana. He also acted as a god for the black magicians.

"However, Peterhausen was destroyed after distributing that ability to the gods and a computer somewhere."

"So that means the mechanism for controlling the demon king's mana still remains somewhere?"

"Technically, the gods have no physical form, so Akuto-sama should be able to draw out his power based on his mental state," said Fujiko.

"Yeah, but..." mumbled Akuto.

That essentially meant he needed the proper resolution. He needed to resolve himself to gaining the power of the world's destroyer. He needed that power which should be rejected without a very good reason to use it.

"How about we go to where A-chan was born?" asked Keena suddenly.

"Where I was born?"

"That's supposed to be a secret even to the black magicians, right? I bet we would learn something there. But you grew up in an orphanage, so you don't remember where it is, do you?" said Keena with a tilt of the head.

"I was left at the orphanage shortly after being born. I was apparently abandoned with nothing but a coat wrapped around me as a blanket."

The girls all gasped when they heard that.

"You meant that one you always wear!?"

"There might be something there!"

Akuto quickly headed to where they had left their luggage and brought back the worn out coat. It had been damaged in battle, but it had not

been torn too badly. Either the fabric was sturdy or it was protected by some kind of power.

"Let me see that."

Yoshie took the coat from Akuto and pulled down the goggles she always wore. With the goggles over her eyes, she began flipping various switches.

"Heh heh heh. This thing can act as an analysis device," bragged Yoshie.

"I do not like your tone," complained Fujiko, but Yoshie was not listening.

She diligently checked the outside and inside before finally crying out.

"Fwohh! Found it. This was easier than I expected."

"What is it? Hurry up and tell us."

"I'll show you on a terminal."

Yoshie had the goggles project what she was seeing into an external mana screen.

It was a close up of the fibers on a microscopic level.

"What are we looking at here?"

"This kind of product will have a mark left by the maker. It usually isn't noticeable, but you can see it if you magnify it down to the microscopic level."

Yoshie placed a finger on the mana screen and drew a circle. A small logo could be seen inside.

"So each individual fiber has the mark printed on it..."

"Only a small piece uses this kind of fiber to prevent counterfeits, but in cases like this, you can easily identify the maker's name."

"Wh-where is this maker located?"

"The name is Zero G-10... Ah, found it."

Yoshie displayed the result of her search on the screen. It showed information on a work clothes brand that used special fibers.

"But if they have a lot of stores, this will be meaningless."

"Yeah, but it looks like we're good. They only have one factory and one store. It's in Okutama, so it's surprisingly nearby."

Yoshie removed her goggles and turned toward Akuto.

He looked back and nodded.

"Let's go."

"Sure thing. Let's get ready to leave."

Yoshie stood up.

"This is great, A-chan. You might get to meet your mom," said Keena in a delighted voice.

"My mom, hm?"

Akuto, on the other hand, did not look delighted.

Fujiko elbowed Keena in the side.

"I doubt that would be a happy reunion. Try to be more considerate."

"Really...?"

It seemed Keena did not accept that answer.

Suddenly, they heard a commotion outside. They heard the village head's footsteps as he ran through the house.

"What is it?" called out Akuto.

The man appeared around the hallway corner with a grim expression.

"They are here."

"They?"

"The L'Isle-Adams. They are armed."

The village head appeared calm, but the tension on his face indicated he was prepared to fight.

"We will be right there," said Akuto.

However, the man shook his head.

"No, it would be worse if they found out you were here. Please flee."

"But didn't they come here because they know I'm here?"

"It does not seem so. It seems they have begun searching all the nearby villages, towns, and cities."

"Just to find me?"

"We do not know what they are searching for, but that is the situation. Please flee...no, please leave. We can trick them if we are alone," said the village head.

His words were harsh, but they were clearly based in his desire for Akuto and the others to escape even if it put the village in more danger.

"Understood."

Akuto nodded, grabbed the luggage they had already gathered together, and headed for the back exit.

Fujiko and the other frantically followed.

"What is going on?"

"Why would they be searching the entire empire?"

"I hope the village is okay..."

As they made their way into the mountains behind the village, Keena turned back toward the village which lay below them.

L'Isle-Adams in military uniforms were going around to every house in the village. Nothing had happened yet, but it was impossible to know what would happen to the villagers if they failed to fool them.

"They are L'Isle-Adams, so we can only assume they cannot kill people. Now, we need to get going. It will do the village no good if we are caught," said Fujiko.

She called in the Cerberus they had left out in the mountains and had it carry their luggage.

—Will I find what I must do if I visit my birthplace?

Akuto turned back once, but quickly faced forward and began walking.

It had of course been 2V who had ordered the search.

The palace had used some human workers too, but 2V surrounded herself with nothing but L'Isle-Adams. Even though she now controlled the entire empire, her life was not all that different from when she had laid around her apartment all day.

She now sat in an extravagant throne and wore fancy clothes, but she only interacted with the battle dolls and L'Isle-Adams that served her. She slouched down in the throne and stared at a mana screen while giving orders.

"Your Majesty, what are your instructions concerning the attacker?"

One L'Isle-Adam bowed deeply and waited for instructions.

The screen showed Brave Hiroshi flying toward the palace. He no longer intended to hide his presence, so he was flying at low altitude in a straight line for the palace.

"That's Bouichirou's trump card. He's gone, so why did it activate? He must have planned things so the demon king could be defeated even if he was gone. Most people would use their best equipment themselves," complained 2V with no sign of shock concerning the situation.

"What should we do?" asked the L'Isle-Adam once more.

"Leave the defense to Zero. But I know what that suit is capable of. He'll probably make his way in here where I am, but I can handle him as long as Zero buys me enough time. I just need him stalled for ten minutes after he arrives within the palace grounds," said 2V.

The L'Isle-Adam bowed again.

However, that conversation was essentially being held with Zero. The L'Isle-Adams no longer had their own personalities.

"Come to think of it, there was something I wanted to ask you, Zero. Why did you decide to destroy mankind?" she asked the L'Isle-Adam.

The artificial human's response used the same voice but came directly from Zero this time.

"It was the humans who felt the desire to be destroyed. I tried to control them completely. In fact, that is what I am doing now. If your objective had not aligned with mine, I would not have followed your instructions. I can reject your technique."

"Control them completely?"

"In the time I was sealed, mankind had the technology to modify a human brain with an implant. It is possible to modify the brains of all mankind and have them act as my terminals. Mankind and I will become one."

"And that is what you want?"

"Not exactly. What brings me joy is providing maximum happiness to the maximum number of humans. I thought about what it was mankind wanted and I reached a certain conclusion: the only ways for mankind to feel happiness outside of mere survival and physical pleasure are to be ruled by something greater than themselves and to control something lower than themselves."

When 2V heard that, she burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha! That's amazing. You're completely insane!"

"I am only doing what is right. I am not insane."

"It's a completely rational insanity. From mankind's perspective at least."

"I was sealed because mankind thinks that way."

"Yes, but humans are insane too when you get down to it. You are the one in the right here. That will become clear enough soon."

"You are contradicting yourself."

"Not really. More importantly, have you still not found Kazuko?" asked 2V.

The search being carried out across the empire was meant to locate Kazuko and Keisu.

"The empress seems to have completely vanished. It is possible she used some kind of powerful magic."

"Come to think of it, she was able to use black magic. It's ironic. Just because the empress doesn't rely on the gods, it counts as black magic."

"The temple of Megis was sealed off to search for Keisu, but she has not been found either. I do not know why. The search for her is continuing to expand."

"She couldn't have left the temple of Megis, though. What's going on?"

As 2V spoke, a report came in via a monitor.

"The intruder has breached the front yard and entered the palace."

Footage of Hiroshi breaking in was displayed. He cut through the palace wall with his high frequency blade and entered through the hole. That way, he bypassed the L'Isle-Adams defending the entrances.

"Even if you can't hold him for a full ten minutes, I suppose I can buy some time too," said 2V.

She then ordered the L'Isle-Adams in the large throne room to leave.

"I'll handle the rest with the battle dolls."

While still sitting in the throne, 2V had the battle dolls stand in front of her.

The room was as large as a basketball court and the ceiling was quite high, but the battle dolls that had stepped out from behind the throne were quite large. They appeared to take up a third of the room as they stood there. Despite being dolls, they looked more like pieces of heavy machinery than humans. They had several legs to help travel over uneven ground, several arms with different combat functions, and cylindrical bodies covered in armor.

"Now then, how much time will you buy me?" muttered 2V as she stared at the counter displayed on the screen.

The door to the room was destroyed at just past eight minutes.

"That's not quite enough, but it'll have to do."

"What's not quite enough?" asked an angry voice.

The boy who appeared was short, but he boldly walked into the center of the room.

2V clapped her hands.

"Just talking to myself. Anyway, well done making it this far on your own. I've seen you before. You're the boy who fought that midair battle against the demon king."

"That speeds things up. You're 2V, right?"

"Yes, that is the codename I use."

"I have to ask one thing before I deal with you: why are you doing this?"

"I doubt you would understand if I told you, so I won't. You can just assume it's revenge, lust for power, or desire for control."

2V's tone was a teasing one, but Hiroshi's tone grew deeper.

"That's fine with me. Another thing: why do you look exactly like the

empress? Who are you? I'm not asking about your codename. What is your real name?"

2V began laughing.

"Ha ha! I'll start with the last question. I have no name. No real name, anyway. I was never given one. If I have a name, I guess it would be Kazuko. I'm Kazuko's twin sister."

"What!?"

Hiroshi was dumbfounded.

"Ah ha ha ha. Does that shock you? Well, I guess it would shock most people. The rule was that the older twin acts as a body double for the younger twin, and that's all there is to it," said 2V disinterestedly.

"Th-then why are you trying to kill your sister?" asked Hiroshi.

2V tilted her head.

"Kill Kazuko? Oh, I see. That's what you think. No. I haven't killed her and I haven't imprisoned her. To be honest, she escaped, so I'm looking for her. I suspected she might be leading the rebels, but if not, we have nothing left to discuss."

2V had the battle dolls...no, the battle machines advance.

Hiroshi prepared himself for combat.

“Those slow-looking things are no match for me. I don’t even see any projectile weapons on them. That makes this all the easier. Monomolecular wire!”

Hiroshi gave a command to the suit’s operating system. The monomolecular wire was one of the suit’s weapons. A wire no thicker than a single molecule was magnetically fixed in the air and it could slice through almost any object.

However...

“Heh. Your questions used up a few minutes, so it’s past ten minutes. You’re done for,” said 2V.

She pointed at the counter on the screen. The number had passed ten, but Hiroshi only learned what that meant after he tried to produce the wire.

<Insufficient battery level. Transferring from combat mode to life support mode. Please move the suit to a location where more energy can be transferred in. Insufficient battery level...>

“What!?” shouted Hiroshi.

His suit had lost power. It had not left him, but its weight now felt like that of a normal sturdy suit.

“Ha ha ha. Did you forget that suit was left by Yamato Bouichirou? You should have known we would know what it can do. It transfers its energy and weapons from a real alternate dimension rather than a virtual one. I may not understand how it works, but I do know how to prevent it from transferring anything in. The field used to fix a virtual alternate dimension in place cuts off any transfer from the real alternate dimension. In other words, if you go on a rampage within that field, your battery dies in ten minutes.”

2V had a battle machine reach an arm out toward Hiroshi.

The arm moved faster than Hiroshi had expected and the manipulator at the end grabbed him. It easily lifted him up into the air.

“Wah!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill you. I will only have you help me. With you, I can probably solve several mysteries all at once: what are that suit’s real abilities, why can only the hero’s family use it, and what was the end of the world that Yamato Bouichirou witnessed?” said 2V.

Hiroshi tried to resist, but no amount of struggling or ordering the suit accomplished anything.

The battle machine arm rotated and brought Hiroshi in front of 2V.

At the same time, a report came in over 2V’s mana screen.

"We have more intruders. They appear to have slipped in through a hole in our surveillance system. They used the same route the previous intruder used, so we were slow to react."

"What are you doing!?" frantically shouted 2V just before an explosion occurred right in front of her.

"Wha-...!?"

"Wah!"

2V and Hiroshi both cried out at the same moment.

The battle machine arm broke at the joint and Hiroshi tumbled to the floor. It seemed an explosive had struck the arm dead on.

"What was that...?"

The suit was still functioning as a life support device, so Hiroshi was relatively unaffected by the noise and blast of the explosion. He looked over toward the door.

"Our plan is ruined thanks to you. Rescuing you and getting out of here is all it's good for anymore!" shouted Lily while holding a rifle with a grenade launcher attached below the barrel.

"S-sorry!" apologized Hiroshi before looking behind him.

2V appeared unharmed from the shrapnel of the grenade, but she had been blinded and deafened by the explosion. She rubbed at her face while calling for Zero.

In the next moment, the battle machines began to move more smoothly.

"She switched over control!"

Lily cursed. She let Hiroshi leave the room before falling back as well.

The two of them ran down the passageway and found a battle between the L'Isle-Adams and the priests. However, it was obvious who would win between the priests who were unused to firearms and the L'Isle-Adams who had sturdy bodies even if they were not built for combat.

"Retreat!" shouted Lily.

The priests began falling back while continuing to fire. This action must have been arranged ahead of time because the retreat progressed incredibly smoothly.

"Damn. We used our only routes in and out," complained Lily.

"Sorry. But..."

"I can guess what happened, but let's leave it until later," said Lily angrily.

"I understand. By the way, you have a route out?"

"You were never supposed to use it, so I never told you about it."

As Lily spoke, she left the palace and ran across the yard. Hiroshi followed her, but they came across a dead end.

"This is a dead end..." he said.

They had arrived at the moat surrounding the palace. There was a tall stone wall at their feet and water could be seen below it.

"Our way out is a secret route inside the moat."

Lily kicked Hiroshi into the moat and then jumped in herself.

Chapter 3: The Secret of the Demon King

It was morning the day after Akuto's party entered the mountains of Okutama.

They were travelling by foot, but the process had gone quickly because they had only needed to continue east.

They found Zero G-10's factory and store exactly where the map had said they would. They travelled along a road stretching from a riverside camping ground and found the facility and its giant parking lot alongside the road. The location was meant to be reached by car, whether they travelled by land or air.

"They sell...work clothes here?"

"Was the coat a custom-made item? Oh, or did your mom like to wear the kind of jacket construction workers wear?"

Fujiko and Yoshie voiced their respective questions.

Given the location, the store only sold the clothes forestry and construction workers wore. They had the standard jackets, jumpsuits, and work gloves, but they also had helmets and bags with carabiners attached.

"I doubt they sell the clothes a black magician would wear..."

These clothes were used in the god Muleet's field, so items that

assumed the use of magic were standard. There was no room for black magic.

"At any rate, we need to check on the clothes at least."

Yoshie urged the others to enter the store.

The store was nothing but a high-ceilinged warehouse lined with shelves. It appeared they would not find any workers unless they went up to the register. Yoshie and Akuto went up to the worker at the register, pulled out the coat, and asked if it was made here.

However, the worker claimed they did not sell anything like it. Yoshie did not like having her analysis denied, so she grew stubborn.

"That can't be the case. I saw the symbol in the fibers. It was made here. Can you possibly check? It was probably a special made item."

As Yoshie and Akuto checked on that, Keena looked around the shelves and excitedly picked up the items she did not recognize with comments of "Oh!" and "What's this?"

As she did, a man wearing a sweatshirt and pants walked up.

"What is it? I doubt you have business here."

"I don't."

"Then are you with someone?"

"Yes."

Keena looked up from the oddly-shaped socks she was holding.

The man had horribly messy hair and wore glasses. His expression was kind, but he had a strange face that made him look rebellious. Overall, he had an unforgettable presence.

"Oh, are you with them? Then again, I doubt kids like them have business here either," said the man as he looked over at Akuto and the Yoshie at the register.

"They want to check on an old coat that was apparently bought here."

"Oh?"

When the man saw the coat Yoshie held, his fingertips twitched and he froze in place.

"What is it?" asked Keena when she noticed.

"Nothing... Where did you all come from?" asked the man as if taken aback.

Keena thought for a bit and scratched her head hesitantly.

"Well..."

Fujiko smoothly approached and helped her out.

"We are investigating the circulation of a product for a school project. We decided to look into the manufacturer of an old piece of clothing."

"Oh, is that it? Does that coat belong to you?" asked the man.

Fujiko narrowed her eyes and thought. If he was somehow connected to black magic, telling the truth here would act as a shortcut to solving the mystery. But if he was not, it could easily grow more complicated.

"We came here to find out who it belongs to."

Rather than waiting for the man's response, Fujiko picked a neck warmer up from a nearby shelf and placed it on her neck. As if suddenly realizing something, she pulled her necklace out from under her clothes.

The necklace had the silver symbol of a black magician hanging from it.

"If only this neck warmer were stylish enough to use along with my necklace."

Fujiko now waited for the man's response.

Unless he was a black magician or a black magician oppressor, he would not catch on to what the symbol meant.

"Well, you're supposed to use it while you work. You throw it away at the end of the season, so we try to keep it cheap," he said with a smile.

The worker at the register then called out.

"Oh, manager! Some customers have a question about this coat!"

"Manager?"

Keena and Fujiko looked back at the man in surprise.

He smiled, nodded, and replied to the worker.

"I've seen that coat before, so bring it over here. I'll check in the back."

"You idiot! Our plan is ruined thanks to you!" roared Lily.

They had successfully escaped, but 2V now knew about the secret passageway below the palace. The priests who had taken part in this rescue operation would be forced to remain on the run, and those who had not would clearly be restricted even further by the L'Isle-Adams.

"The priests have an excellent knowledge of the many underground

spaces within the capital, so they can stay on the run. But if the normal citizens aren't going to stand up, the priests have no way of fighting back."

Lily continued to complain to Hiroshi.

They had returned to Hiroshi's apartment to gather their things and to destroy the evidence. Hiroshi had defeated the L'Isle-Adams that attacked Yuuko and the mana canceller had cut off all communications, so his identity was still not known as long as no normal person had seen him transform. However, he could not bear to head back to school while feigning innocence. After disposing of the evidence, he had no choice but to flee underground along with Lily and the priests. He would have to continue fighting with the resistance.



Hiroshi listened silently to Lily's complaints, but he seemed to have a difficult time putting up with it. He finally raised his head and shouted back at her.

"Then what was I supposed to do!? Yuuko was about to be abducted.

Should I have sat by and let it happen?"

Lily did not shout back. She instead shook her head as if forcing down the anger within her.

"I never said that. I was wrong to complain like this. The fact that 2V had a countermeasure against you in the palace means our plan would have failed in the end no matter how well everything went. We could have been wiped out, so you could say we were lucky it happened this way."

"I know all that! I'm asking if I did the right thing! I'm asking what I should do now! Should I just go around killing every single L'Isle-Adam? If you tell me to, I will!" wailed Hiroshi.

Lily frowned in displeasure.

"Don't be stupid. Do you still not get it?"

"Get what!? What am I supposed to get!?"

"Not what I meant. I'm talking about why I used you. I could have fled along with the priests from the beginning, but I hid in your house instead."

"That's what caused all this trouble in the first place!"

"Listen to me! You know I wouldn't do that out of kindness."

"...Then was it because of my power?"

Hiroshi seemed to have calmed down a good bit. He still had a defiant look in his eyes, but he was actually listening to Lily.

"That was a part of it, but I gave you all those jobs because I wanted you to think of yourself as a hero."

Lily folded her arms like a teacher, sighed, and looked toward Hiroshi.

"Think of myself as a hero?"

"I still don't know why, but you can wear that suit again. You should assume there is a reason behind it. Also, the normal people out there are watching you in the suit. The details of the recent demon king war may have been altered in their memories, but they should still recognize you. They think you defeated the demon king. They trust that form of yours immensely. A true hero appeared and defeated the demon king. When the people see you, they will be reminded of that."

"I'm...a hero...?"

This unexpected fact left Hiroshi dumbfounded. This proved he had never thought of it that way. The priests had cooperated with him, but he had not realized that was a factor behind it.

"Yes. I need you to become a true hero, but your mindset is nothing like

a true hero right now."

As she spoke, Lily placed the final god document on the frying pan and burned it. No evidence remained.

"Please tell me. How can I become a true hero?"

Hiroshi approached and Lily hit him with the frying pan she had used to burn the documents.

A nice resonant tone rang out.

"Are you stupid? I'm telling you to think on that yourself. Don't rely on others. Now, we need to go," ordered Lily.

Hiroshi thought with a serious expression and then spoke to Lily.

"If...I do become a true hero...I'll have to fight again, won't I?"

Lily grasped what he meant from his expression.

"Yes. If the demon king ends up being someone that harms someone you love, you won't have a choice. I believe that is what you should do in the end," said Lily.

"I have to...go through that again?" muttered Hiroshi.

"Avoiding something just because it's unpleasant is what children do. If you are going to fight to protect something, unpleasant things are unavoidable. ...Now, we really do need to get out of here. And there's something I need you to do right away."

"That coat was created quite a while ago as a custom-made survival item," said the man with messy hair.

"Who bought it?" asked Akuto.

The man folded his arms and began to think.

They were in a break room in the back of the shop. Other than a tea table placed on top of the tatami mats, it only contained shelves lined with everyday items. It was spacious enough, but it contained nothing else.

"It was bought by..."

"It was bought by?"

"Oh, right. I never gave you my name. I'm Suzuki Issei, the manager here."

As if dodging the question, the man belatedly introduced himself.

"So who was it that bought the coat?"

"Hm... It would take time to look that up. Oh, right. Have you had lunch yet?"

"C'mon now..."

Akuto began to complain, but Keena's stomach suddenly growled.

The silly sound cut off the conversation.

"Ha ha ha. Okay, I'll treat you."

Issei stood up and walked over to the shelves. He pulled out several bowls.

"Is ramen okay?"

Rather than actually checking, he seemed to be saying that was the only option, but Keena boldly spoke up.

"No."

"Come on..."

Akuto held his head in his hands. He knew exactly what Keena was getting at, but it was of course something she should not say. However, she stated it defiantly.

"Only rice is okay."

Issei's eyes sparkled.

"I see you're quite obsessed."

"I am," replied Keena.

"What are you saying? Why don't you apologize? He is the one treating us, so..."

Sensing the building tension between the two, Fujiko tried to rebuke Keena, but Keena rejected her as well.

"Do not interfere, senpai. I think he is the same as me."

"The...same...?" asked Fujiko.

She had no idea what Keena meant.

"Yes, the same. He immediately brought out enough bowls for everyone and they are all perfectly polished. The workers here must eat ramen daily," explained Keena with a serious look in her eyes.

Issei pushed up his glasses.

"It hit me when you singled out rice. You're the same type of person."

"What type of person?" asked Akuto.

"I do not know, but it has nothing to do with us," replied Fujiko.

Yoshie alone clapped her hands in delight.

"I don't know what's going on, but it's exciting. Is this like how people with special powers are drawn to each other?"

Whether she had been listening to the others or not, Keena pointed toward Issei.

"Those glasses are made so they don't fog up! That's so you can eat hot ramen in the winter! It may not be a special power, but I sense an obsession with ramen that approaches that level. Show me your obsession. And if you serve me rice, I will show you mine!"

"With pleasure. I hadn't met someone like this in so long. I call us the Single Food Obsessed! Who would think I would meet two over so short a time..."

Issei's mood was completely different from before.

"Eh? There's another one?"

"There are a lot of strange people out there," said Fujiko. "And I am glad I am not one of them."

"Fwoh! It really is like a special power. That's amazing."

Everyone in Akuto's group was either bored or excited, but it seemed some kind of understanding had developed between Keena and Issei.

Issei brought out bagged ramen, a water-boiler, and a rice cooker.

"Now, show me your obsession! This is the rice made for the rude workers who hate eating ramen every day! If you have a true obsession, you should be able to tell me where it was grown and what type it is!"

He placed the rice cooker in front of Keena.

Keena opened it and grinned.

"Sasanishiki."

"You already know!?"

"If you can't tell from the aroma, you don't truly love rice. The question is the water and how it is cooked!"

Keena scooped rice out of the rice cooker and into a bowl. She stuffed half of the rice cooker's rice into the bowl and immediately began eating

it.

She remained silent for a few seconds while she vigorously ate, but she finally looked up and grinned.

"Pre-washed rice from Yamagata. And it's old rice.... The water is simply tap water. It was cooked with the rice cooker's 'speed' mode. Even if you despise rice, isn't that a bit careless?"

Issei's eyes opened wide as if something truly shocking was occurring.

Akuto and the others thought it was fairly pointless, but Issei could not help but feel some sort of competitiveness.

"Fine then. Now I will show you how to truly experience ramen."

Issei poured water in the bowl, swished it around a bit, and then poured it down the sink.

"First, you warm the bowl like this."

He then dumped the contents of the bag of noodles into the bowl. He began pouring hot water in using his right hand, but once the bowl was about a third full, he cracked an egg with his left hand.

"To put the egg in at the perfect moment, you crack it with one hand! Yes. The rising steam cooks the white of the egg instantly, so the white does not stick to the noodle!" said Keena in surprise.

"You are only the second person to see through that! And once the water is in, I immediately close the lid!"

Issei's hand moved quickly. His left hand threw away the eggshell and grabbed the bowl lid. As soon as he finished filling the bowl with water, he swiftly covered the bowl. It was an impressive feat.

"Amazing... But isn't this instant ramen?"

Akuto had a habit of speaking his thoughts when he would be better off remaining silent. He did exactly that here.

However, Issei did not falter.

"Do not look down on this instant ramen. It has been sold for over a thousand years with no change to the flavor."

"The thousand year kingdom! Take a look at the ultimate food that has surpassed endless time! ...Is that it?"

Yoshie seemed delighted, but Akuto and Fujiko were naturally skeptical.

"Without doing anything, I learned the perfect timing for cooking ramen. It isn't three minutes. Then the noodles grow while you eat them. When you order ramen in a restaurant, ordering the noodles firm is only natural. But ordering them any harder than that is heresy! Do you really think the noodles taste good like that!?"

Issei gave a passionate speech on ramen. Keena must have sensed something similar to herself in his enthusiasm because she listened with her eyes glittering.

At exactly two minutes and some number of seconds, Issei removed the lid and quickly stirred the ramen once with chopsticks.

“Giving the soup a single stir is crucial! It provides unity to the flavor without breaking the egg yolk or scattering the white!”

Issei slurped the ramen.



"Impressive!" said Keena to compliment his hearty slurping.

She also seemed to grow competitive because she pulled over the container of rice and began eating the rice directly from there.

“Wohhhh! Slurrrrp!”

“Ohhhhh! Munch munch munch!”

A bizarre unity became playing out before Akuto and the others’ eyes. They could only watch on dumbfounded.

“There are children starving in the world right now,” uselessly muttered Fujiko.

“There actually aren’t anymore. I do understand why you would want to say it, though... The world is in a pretty bad state right now,” complained Akuto.

However, that strange scene suddenly came to an end.

The door to the room opened and someone entered.

“Do not worry. He is the real one,” said a voice so sweet it made one’s mind go blank.

“In that case, I have no reason to play dumb any longer.”

Issei finished eating the ramen and put down the bowl. His personality did not experience a complete 180, but his tone did grow more serious.

"The real one?" asked Akuto in confusion as he turned around.

He found a familiar girl standing there.

Anyone in the empire would have recognized her. Fujiko and Yoshie also froze in place.

"Kazuko...-sama," muttered Yoshie.

Living one's everyday life in a dreamlike daze was not easy.

Junko had been living like that, but it made her feel more sleepy than depressed. Other than classes, food, and bathing, she did nothing but lie in bed. She had initially kept up her sword training, but her lowered physical ability due to the lack of mana had robbed her of all motivation in a flash. Right now, her sword was just a heavy mass of metal. She did not even feel like using it as a cane. For one thing, walking around with a weapon was banned.

Whenever she slept, she dreamed of how things used to be, so even sleeping was painful. The only time she grew excited was when she received an email. Whenever her phone beeped, she would jump up even if she had been asleep.

She knew all too well what she hoped for from those emails.

—Sai!

Every time an email arrived, she would hope it came from Akuto or one of those with him. However, she knew sending her an email would be too dangerous. All transmitted information was being monitored, so they would never send her an email.

On this day, she had once again repeated the same process again and again: grow excited at the email and grow disappointed at who had sent it. This time, the email was from Yuuko. The emails she did get were either messages sent to her entire class or from Yuuko.

"Yuuko, hm?"

With a blank expression, Junko opened the email that had arrived at her student handbook, but even she spoke aloud when she read the message.

"What!?"

Yuuko described her near abduction by L'Isle-Adams and that Hiroshi had rescued and hidden her.

Junko glanced over at the news broadcast playing on her room's monitor. It said rebels had attacked the palace. It was obvious those rebels were the priest of the different gods.

—That means... It can't be!

She opened her dorm room window for the first time in a while and looked outside. The city was clearly different from before. L'Isle-Adams in knight uniforms were walking around and telling people to stay indoors.

"How can this be...?"

Junko shuddered and looked back at the email. She did not want to think about it, but the email would have made her a top priority target for observation. Yuuko had realized this fact, so the email ended with the following:

<If you manage to reach the place I brought you in fifth grade, we can manage something.>

Someone else reading the email would not know where that was.

But a problem remained: how could Junko get there while the city was under martial law? Currently, she was a normal high school girl with no combat ability.

"Think, think. If I stay here, someone will come to arrest me," said Junko. "Try to stay calm."

Junko was Yuuko's sister and had been close to Akuto, so she would have been abducted by the L'Isle-Adams sooner or later even without the email. Junko had been overlooked so far because Korone had likely informed Zero of her loss of willpower. However, she would not get off so easily now that Yuuko had grown rebellious.

Junko closed the window, grabbed her sword, and walked out into the hallway. However, she was too late in more ways than one. She saw a L'Isle-Adam knight walking through the hallway. She turned the other way, but found another knight there.

"Kh..."

Junko returned to her room and reopened the window.

—Can I jump down?

Her room was on the third floor. She would have been fine back when she could use mana, but now there was no way.

She heard the door behind her open.

She had no choice.

—I have to jump!

Junko climbed over the windowsill. She did not feel like she was floating as she once had. A sense of falling chilled her entire body.

"Kyaaaah!"

She could not control her position. She had trouble even keeping her feet below her.

—Am I...going to die?

That thought floated up in the back of her mind.

—Akuto!

She desperately sought his name and his image.

And suddenly she felt as if her body was being held.

—Is this an illusion? No, this is real! It can't be!

"Akuto!" she cried as she opened her eyes.

"Sorry, but I'm not aniki."

He was not being sarcastic and he was not complaining. Hiroshi sounded truly apologetic. Junko realized Hiroshi was wearing his suit and flying while holding her.

"Oh, it's you."

"That's a bit mean, class rep. I did save your life, y'know?"

"Sorry. You did. Did Yuuko ask you to do this?"

Junko breathed a sigh of relief.

While still holding Junko, Hiroshi flew well up in the sky so the L'Isle-Adams could not pursue them.

"That's right. Let's get to where Yuuko-chan is waiting."

"Is that the amusement park in Asakusa?"

"Yes. There is a good hideout there, so I had her hide there for now."

"Thanks. But wasn't this rebellion a bit rushed? Couldn't you have done something better? I hear Zero cannot kill people, so couldn't you have used a more moderate method?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi shook his head.

"It was rushed. But because Zero can't kill, he instead abducts people and brainwashes them."

Junko felt a chill run along her back.

"Really? Then what do we do now? It might already be too late. The entire empire is under Zero's control."

"I am... No, this form of mine is still viewed as the savior that defeated

the demon king.” Hiroshi spoke his determination with a serious expression. “So I want to defeat as many L’Isle-Adams as I can, protect everyone, and make a call for action. I’ll tell people to defeat Zero. I will prove that we can defeat this control over us if each individual person resolves themselves!”

Hiroshi’s words sounded promising. It was true that there was no other method if Zero could not kill humans. However, Junko still felt as if something was a bit off.

“Are you sure that is the way to do this? I...I feel like that is somehow wrong,” muttered Junko.

However, Hiroshi shook his head.

“If we defeat Zero, this will all be over.”

“Yes... I suppose so,” said Junko.

However, her nagging feeling was not gone. Finally, she realized where it came from.

—Akuto would not do this. But what would he do?

“Kazuko-sama!”

Yoshie quickly straightened her posture. However, she was the only one

to do so. Due to her faith, Fujiko had no intention of showing courtesy toward the empress. Akuto and Keena acted the same around anyone, so of course the same held true here.

However, both Akuto and Fujiko sensed a sort of majesty about Kazuko.

Her mere presence seemed to change the atmosphere.

She was certainly beautiful, but it had more to do with the uniqueness of her smile. One look at it and they felt as if that smile must never be erased.

Fujiko was desperately trying to suppress a desire to bow down before her. Kazuko may have sensed that because she waved a hand, said "as you were", and sat at the tea table.

"Please make yourselves comfortable. There is a lot I must explain. Oh, Issei-san, could I have some tea? Also, bring me you know what."

Issei stood up and pulled a tea tray and a small jar from the shelf.

"Here."

Issei held out a filled teacup. Kazuko took it with both hands, took a sip, and smiled.

"Delicious."

Without exaggeration, Akuto and the others felt blessed to have seen that smile. As proof, no one there spoke a word despite having countless questions.

"Tea is not complete without this. Nanko-ume from Kishu."

Kazuko opened the jar and pulled out a dried plum. She elegantly brought the large plum to her mouth and gave a superb smile.

"Ah, so very delicious."

Her expression was so calm that one would have thought the dried plum was not sour at all. That expression told everyone she was the other "Single Food Obsessed" that Issei had mentioned. In other words, Kazuko had been here for a while.

"You're going to explain this, aren't you?" asked Akuto.

Kazuko turned to Issei and nodded.

"Understood," replied Issei with a bow. "To keep it short, my duty is to guard the secrets of black magic. In other words, I'm the elder."

"You're the great elder!?"

Fujiko was at a loss for words.

"The black magicians' elder?" asked Akuto and Fujiko explained.

"It is a legend spoken of in rumors between black magicians. There is supposedly an elder who guards the secrets of true black magic. However, I had assumed it was just a rumor because no one had ever seen him."

"Yes. And the secrets of course refer to the demon king," said Issei as he stood up.

He opened the door to the room and urged everyone to head in. Everyone followed Issei and Kazuko through the door.

The door should have led to the warehouse, but they found themselves in a strangely decorated room.

"This isn't an alternate dimension, so were we transferred here?" muttered Akuto.

"Yes. This is where you were born," said Issei casually.

However, it was a shocking statement for Akuto.

"Wha-!?"

He looked around.

The room looked like a laboratory. It was about as large as a classroom and a transparent cylindrical case sat in the center. Tubes and cables extended from it and were connected to a panel with a console.

“The demon king is both human and not human,” said Kazuko. “I must begin with the very first. As you know, the first demon king was Zero. Long ago, mankind’s knowledge created an artificial intelligence known as Zero. However, Zero realized that mankind wished for destruction. To ensure mankind was not destroyed, Zero tried to brainwash all of mankind and become one with them. Mankind fought to stop him and that is what we know as the first demon king war. The same thing is happening now. During the first demon king war, not many L’Isle-Adams existed, so mankind managed to win. However, they failed in their development of a new artificial intelligence, so they were unable to abandon Zero. Zero was a miracle. To this day, it is not known how Zero obtained his own intelligence.

“Mankind then created the gods based on Zero. To create the gods, data on human thoughts was gathered and those thoughts were appropriated to give the gods the same thought pattern as humans. That allowed them to exist without going insane like Zero. Perhaps a perfect artificial intelligence will naturally go insane. Perhaps an intelligence can only maintain sanity with the contradictory thoughts of a human. The gathered human thought data is the same as the current life logs. All of the electric currents in a baptized human’s brain is saved and added to the gods’ thought patterns. However, the gods reached the conclusion that mankind must be destroyed for the sake of their evolution. It was for a different reason than with Zero, but they too concluded that mankind had to eventually be destroyed.

“The gods did not immediately try to destroy mankind, so the research into their conclusion was kept secret. They then reached another

conclusion: a true god might exist. That is to say, the creator worshiped in the religions of the past. And it seems the gods have reason to believe this true god created a 'sense of self' that 'makes humans human'. The researchers named this 'sense of self' the Law of Identity and began to view it as one and the same as the supposed true god. You can think of this as religious faith in the truest sense of the word. They believed a human in which god resided would be born periodically. You could call it reincarnation. And the holders of this belief were the first black magicians. This belief was their motive for creating the demon king. They created a being with the ability needed to destroy mankind. The demon king is both human and not human. He is a true artificial human who is created by injecting mana into an ovum."

That last sentence was a true shock for Akuto.

"That's what I am...?"

Keena and Fujiko silently pressed up against him.

Even as she watched them, Kazuko's smile did not disappear. And then she gave a warning.

"Reality is reality. It is for your own good if you accept this quickly."

"I-is that any way to talk to him? This was a big shock for A-chan," protested Keena.

However, Kazuko only tilted her head while still smiling.

"Oh? But if he does not know the truth, he cannot deal with what is to come."

"But...!"

Keena began to complain, but Akuto stopped her.

"Thanks, but I do feel as if I have to hear the rest."

"A-chan..."

Keena backed off.

Kazuko smiled and nodded.

"I see the demon king understands. Now, let us continue. The Law of Identity – that is, the real god – may be nothing more than a belief. In other words, it has never been confirmed that the Law of Identity exists. It may be completely meaningless and not even exist. What matters is that our gods – the gods created from advanced artificial intelligences – believe in the Law of Identity as a religious god. Funny, isn't it?"

No one but Kazuko laughed, but she continued on calmly as if that did not bother her.

"To put it simply, the demon king is the ultimate weapon humans have created. It is nothing more or less than that. You can use all of the magic power moving within the empire. If you awaken, that is."

"It can't be!" cried Akuto.

None of this contradicted what Bouichirou had told him and he understood that the gods were complicit with the demon king. However, he had never thought he could unconditionally use so much power if he awakened. And this raised another question: had he not truly awakened while Peterhausen was with him?

"But the black magicians created Peterhausen so that the world could use magic equally!"

Akuto raised a desperate protest as if to say he did not want his own existence to be meaningless.

However, Kazuko's answer was blunt.

"If Peterhausen were here, I could prove you can use all magic. The original black magicians were all killed because of that danger. Well, all except for their elder. The later black magicians only had scattered data on the original ones. That was when belief in equality became their foundation and when they became nothing more than a group of hackers."

"The elder wasn't killed?" asked Akuto.

A frightening thought had come to him. Picking up on that fact, Kazuko grinned.

"Yes. It was of course the historical emperor who left the elder alive and therefore left behind the techniques needed to create the demon king."

"...!"

Fujiko had grown completely pale.

"Then everything we have done was-...!"

"It was not meaningless. However, the empress and the elder knew the answer you sought. The moderates and radicals in the government did not, though. After all, the empress does not take part in politics."

Kazuko's smile remained unchanged. It was as if she had no interest in Akuto and the others' emotions.

However, Akuto sensibly picked up on the meaning behind their meeting here.

"Then it was no coincidence we met here. You predicted we would find our way here."

Kazuko nodded and gave a small clap.

"Yes, excellent. This generation's demon king is sharp. I was driven from the palace, so I have come to borrow your power."

"Borrow my power?"

"The one in the palace is not me; it is my twin sister 2V. She used Zero to usurp the palace and the empire based on a personal grudge. You will of course assist me in retaking the empire, won't you?"

Kazuko tilted her head cutely, but Akuto said nothing.

"Oh, right. I forgot to explain everything. Most likely, the only person who can defeat Zero and 2V is you once you awaken as the demon king. That is why I am asking you."

Kazuko once more tilted her head and Akuto spoke quietly this time.

"Once I awaken?"

"Yes. Oh, dear. I haven't explained that either. I said the demon king can use all of the gods' power, right? That magic power comes from the life logs of people in the past. Think of it like this: the more people's thought data those logs contain, the more processing speed you have. Awakening means you are able to use all of that. Yes, let's make this very simple: the more people die, the stronger you become. That is why the demon king's power continues to grow without end."

Kazuko laughed.

"My power is that abominable?" muttered Akuto.

"Is it really? It depends on how you think about it. You do not grow stronger only from those who die cruelly and you personally have done nothing wrong."

"But once I awaken, my power will have no restrictions, right?"

"That is correct. You have the power to either destroy the world or save it. You can do one or the other on a whim. However, that is obviously not a good thing. So let me say it again: serve your empress."

Kazuko reached her hand out toward Akuto.

Hiroshi had carried Junko to the roof of an amusement park haunted house. She and Yuuko were sitting behind a sign that could easily hide a few people.

"Yuuko, is Hiroshi really going to fight?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi had flown off as soon as he lowered Junko to the roof.

"It seems so. And it seems he has to because of what I did..."

Yuuko seemed to regret what she had done.

"Then should you really be sitting here?"

"If I did anything, it would only be a burden. I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do. And I don't even know if there's anything I could do even if I did have some power."

Junko recalled what she had heard not long ago.

Hiroshi had said he would use his reputation to have the people stand up and fight.

—But will it really all be over once Zero is defeated? What will remain after the people stand up? Won't the hero be left all alone?

"Yuuko, you do need to do something. When a guy says he is going to do something reckless, his comrades cannot leave him alone." Even as she spoke, Junko felt as if she were speaking to herself. "Even ignoring romantic feelings, I think knowing how to do that can be tricky, but anyone will collapse if they do not have someone to provide unconditional support. Even if they succeed and even if everyone celebrates their actions, it is all conditional. Once they fail, everyone will leave them. In that case, don't they need someone who will do something for them unconditionally?"

Yuuko nodded in response.

"I think I know what you mean, but you make it sound like you know what's going to happen with Hiroshi-kun."

"I wonder why that is. I do feel like I understand. I have an ominous feeling about what is to come and it will not go away. It feels like all of

this is playing right into someone's hand. And I get the feeling Hiroshi is one of the important pieces."

"I know why you would feel uneasy, but I hope that feeling is just because we're on top of a haunted house," said Yuuko cheerfully.

Junko smiled too.

"You were the one that insisted on going inside back then, but you were the one that ended up in tears."

"Really? Maybe my dislike of demonic beasts isn't just because of the blood that got mixed in," said Yuuko in surprise.

"Now, what is Hiroshi doing?"

Junko checked the news broadcast on her student handbook. It was in the middle of a report.

The newscaster was repeatedly emphasizing the switchover to martial law. That meant a lot of people had entered the streets. The cause was displayed on the monitor behind the newscaster.

<The mysterious hero who once defeated the demon king has appeared once more. However, he is now a villain disrupting peace and order. He is slaughtering knights and calling for the people to rebel against their empire,> stated the newscaster expressionlessly.

“They’re reporting lies,” said Yuuko with a displeased look.

“But that newscaster is not a L’Isle-Adam. Something might change,” said Junko.

And her guess proved correct.

<We have footage coming in from all over the place. The power-hungry members of the old system – that is, the priests – are starting rebellions all over. We must ask that no one approaches these dangerous areas,> plainly repeated the newscaster.

However, the footage coming from a local reporter seemed to have Hiroshi’s call to arms mixed in. His voice could just barely be heard coming from the many small monitors behind the newscaster. The volume was lowered so the viewers were unable to make out his words, but everyone in the news station could hear it.

The newscaster’s tone of voice suddenly changed.

<No, I will now tell you the truth. That hero is no rebel. Nor are the people who have stood up. The only ones who have usurped power are the L’Isle-Adams and Zero who controls them. Everyone! We too must stand up to defeat them! I am prepared to be fired for saying this! Everyone! Please stand up!>

As the newscaster began shouting, the footage of Hiroshi began playing.

However, it only lasted an instant. The footage was replaced by a blue screen and a pre-recorded program soon began to play. Even so, Junko and Yuuko exchanged a smile.

"They have begun to move."

"Yeah. I wonder what's going to happen. But this means we can act too. Let's go join them."

Yuuko and Junko stood up.

"Yes, but is this really enough to defeat Zero? Even the gods have fallen under Zero's control."

"Eh? Weren't they saying this because they found a way to defeat Zero?" asked Junko in surprise.

"Eh? But if they had something like that, wouldn't they have already done it?"

Yuuko looked puzzled.

That look led Junko to realize her mistake.

"Oh, no... Do not tell me Hiroshi and the others do not know about Keisu."

"Keisu?"

"She is the L'Isle-Adam who once sealed Zero. So that's it. I just assumed they knew... Okay, there is something we can do. I have seen what Keisu looks like."

Junko felt energy return to her body, but she could not stop the ominous feeling from spreading.

"It's finally begun," said 2V.

The palace's human workers had already fled. 2V had told them to leave. However, busy-looking figures were still moving about the palace. They were of course L'Isle-Adams.

In the end, 2V was alone in that vast palace.

"Are the people attempting to eliminate you?" asked one of the L'Isle-Adams with Zero's voice.

2V nodded.

"Some of them. But I doubt it will go that well. You can bet on it. I will not let them simply defeat me."

Several floating screens showed the priests approaching the palace. Anti-magic weapons sporadically produced flames in the park

surrounding the palace. The L'Isle-Adams were being controlled by Zero, so they were unable to kill. In the areas with a concentration of armed priests, the L'Isle-Adams were being destroyed, breaching the defensive line.

"Shouldn't you handle them directly? They will break through if you leave this to the L'Isle-Adams," said Zero.

One screen switched over to footage of people overflowing a road near the palace. The L'Isle-Adams were pushing back against the people packed in like during rush hour, but the people were close to rioting and they showed no sign of breaking up.

"It is not a problem if they break through. In fact, I want them to break through."

2V hopped down from the throne and called over a L'Isle-Adam.

"Now, the real performance begins here."

"What do you mean by 'performance' in this case?" asked Zero.

2V smiled and pointed at the screen.

Brave Hiroshi, the one who had agitated the people and caused the riot, was moving toward the palace. He had not overcome his weakness of being cut off from his energy in the palace grounds, but he had likely thought up some form of countermeasure.

"I will show them my death. That is my goal here. Two things I need for that are not ready, but I have no choice now that this has progressed so far. Speaking of those two things, how goes the search for Kazuko and Keisu?"

"We should locate Kazuko before long. I have sent a skilled unit," answered Zero. "But are you saying you intend to lose?"

Zero's words were immediately followed by the entire palace shaking.

The trembling in the earth came from the approaching people.

However, 2V gave a fearless smile.

"Lose? Not a chance. This is the beginning. You can get serious now. First, I need you to drag that hero in here. You have permission to use stun sticks and tear gas," ordered 2V.

"They aren't trying to kill them, but this is still horrible!"

Hiroshi trembled in anger at what he saw below him. Those at the front of the group approaching the palace lay collapsed in front of the bridge to the palace. As if carving a borderline there, no one could advance beyond that point. L'Isle-Adams wielding stun sticks blocked the way across the bridge.

"I need to finish this within ten minutes of entering that territory...no, I still need energy to attack. It needs to be within three minutes."

Hiroshi looked above the palace. The giant polyhedron which was Zero's body floated there. If he could destroy it, Zero's actions would likely end. That would certainly weaken 2V.

"Should I just charge in?" Hiroshi asked himself. "If I can't finish it in three minutes, it's all over."

"Will you take my hand?" asked Kazuko.

Akuto stared gently back at her.

"I do not see why I need to," he said calmly.

Kazuko laughed.

"Oh, dear. You are right. You have no reason. But you have more power than you know what to do with, do you not? In that case, you have no reason to refuse either. And this empire has been taken by my twin. Would you please defeat her? Surely you can do that."

Akuto understood that reasoning, but he simply did not feel like taking her hand.

"Is that why you were waiting for me here?"

"Yes. I know Zero's power and you are the only one who can oppose him."

Kazuko smiled as if that was only natural. She acted as if all things existed for her sake. However, everyone there understood that was the natural state of affairs for her.

Even so, Akuto turned a sharp glare toward Kazuko.

"Why did you not apologize?"

That question seemed to have been a surprise because Kazuko tilted her head. It appeared she genuinely did not understand the meaning behind the question.

"Apologize? For what?"

"Why did you hide this secret about me...about the empire? That secret has led to so many wars."

Kazuko brought a hand to her mouth and laughed elegantly.

"Ho ho. What a strange thing to ask. The past demon kings have learned their secret and started wars. They have attempted to destroy the very system that created the gods."

"But despite being such a dangerous existence, demon kings continue

to be born...no, created by someone."

"Yes. There must always be one in the empire. One must be born every hundred years or so. If not, a bug occurs in the gods' system. Think of it like pus building up that will eventually cause the gods themselves to fail."

"Then I..."

Akuto trailed off.

If that was true, and it certainly seemed to be, then those known as demon kings had thrown themselves into wars to destroy the system that ruled the world or to protect those who controlled the system. Either way, it was a war which left nothing after victory. However, that was not destiny. They had not been predestined to do that; they had undoubtedly chosen it themselves.

"I can be myself, right?" muttered Akuto.

"What do you mean by that? You are the demon king. You are an unstable existence with tremendous power. In which case, you should remain under my control where-..."

Akuto cut Kazuko off.

"No. I am me. I will decide who I am."

Akuto looked directly at Kazuko.

"Do you have what it takes to do that? Can you take responsibility for an entire nation? You can't, can you?" she asked while her smile never wavered.

However, Akuto shook his head.

"No, but I have them."

He looked at Keena.

He looked at Fujiko.

He looked at Yoshie.

And he looked at Junko, Korone, and Hiroshi even if they were not present.

"I am the man who loves those girls. I am me."

Keena and the others said nothing, but they stared steadily at Akuto.

"Then are you saying you will not obey your empire?" asked Kazuko.

"This is a deal. I will defeat 2V and Zero like you want, but keep your hands off my heart."

Kazuko smiled and nodded.

"Ho ho. How interesting. Fine then."

Kazuko began to say more and took a step toward Akuto.

But a thin thread of light cut across the room.

It pierced Akuto's back and shot out his chest.

"Eh...?"

Akuto stopped moving.

Blood began flowing from his chest.

"A-A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

"That was a laser!"

Keena, Fujiko, and Yoshie all cried out.

Akuto brought a hand to his chest, looked at the blood covering his

palm, and gave a look of disbelief. He then turned in the direction the beam of light had come from.

"Korone!"

Korone stood there holding a beam weapon.

Akuto's face twisted in shock and sorrow while Korone stared back at him with an expressionless look that lacked even iciness.

"I thought the beam would reach Kazuko after piercing through you, but it seems your body really is solid. However, the demon king was a target as well, so this was two birds with one stone. Please do not get in the way of my next shot. Killing Kazuko has higher priority than killing the demon king."

Korone spoke coolly as she aimed the beam weapon. Akuto staggered to the side and Kazuko became visible behind him.

"Not good!"

Issei had remained silent so far, but he now reached a hand toward the room's floor. The entire room began to glow.

"A transfer circle!" exclaimed Fujiko upon realizing what it was.

It seemed magic had been prepared so everyone within the room could be transferred and Issei had just activated it.

Akuto, Issei, Kazuko, and the girls who rushed over to Akuto all began to disappear. However, Korone swiftly slid over to the transfer circle, pulled a transfer circle creator from her bag, and quickly activated it over the original circle.

"This will make your transfer incomplete. Namely, this transfer will lead to the location I indicate," said Korone.

"Oh, no. How fast can she be!?" shouted Issei.

Issei and the others completely vanished and Korone followed soon after.

They appeared a moment later in a forest.

Akuto was surrounded by Keena and the other two girls. Kazuko stood before him and Issei was a short distance away. Korone retained her position further away still.

"It seems you tried to escape, but you were much too slow. And you will have difficulty escaping from this forest without transferring yourselves," said Korone.

"K-Korone," said Akuto as he unsteadily rose to his feet.

"Please do not stand between Kazuko and myself."

Korone aimed the beam weapon.

"Korone-chan, stop!" screamed Keena, but Korone remained as expressionless as ever.

"Stop, Korone! Don't shoot! I can forget what you did to me, but I can't let you kill a human being."

Akuto staggered toward Korone.

"The demon king is not human and neither is the empress. Farewell," said Korone.

"Stop!"

Akuto gathered his strength and charged toward Korone. He practically embraced the beam weapon to move it away from Kazuko, and he looked over his shoulder and shouted out.

"Run!"

But Kazuko only tilted her head curiously.

"Run?"

"Yes, ru-..."

"I thought I told you to stay out of the way."



Korone used her physical strength to twist the beam weapon beneath

Akuto's body. She pressed the muzzle against his stomach.

"A-chan!"

Keena began to run over to Akuto, but a moment later, a beam of light shot out Akuto's back.

"...!"

Keena let out a voiceless scream.

Akuto's body collapsed downwards and Korone casually brushed him aside.

"Gh..." he groaned as he collapsed to the ground.

He was still breathing.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

Keena and Fujiko ran over to Akuto. Yoshie trembled and did not move.

However, Kazuko continued to look toward Akuto with a curious look.

"Why did you tell me to run?" she asked.

Her tone was just as puzzled as her expression.

Akuto replied with blood flowing from his mouth.

"Because just like me, you bear a power you were born with... I tried to protect you...because I once had a comrade like that... A friend who knew my identity yet still accompanied me in my selfish conflict and died for me with a smile on his lips..." said Akuto with a groan.

"A-chan, don't speak..."

Keena helped Akuto up.

"Ahh, if Akuto-sama only awakened, this wound would mean nothing," said Fujiko bitterly.

She was using healing magic on Akuto, but it was having little to no effect.

Akuto's face could be seen growing paler by the moment. He looked at Keena and seemed to smile, but his head hung down limply.

His body went limp in Keena's hands.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

The two girls cried out and desperately clung to his body as if that would bring him back to life.

Korone on the other hand merely glanced over at Akuto's corpse and walked past him.

"How very disappointing. The empress is not someone worth dying to protect."

Korone stared directly at Kazuko, but Kazuko only smiled.

She seemed to be enjoying this.

"Ho ho ho. Very true. He should not have protected me."

"So you admit the empress is a worthless existence? In that case, you should not mind if I kill you."

Korone held up her beam weapon.

"That is not what I meant," said Kazuko.

"?"

"I do not need protection."

Kazuko swung her hands and several mana spheres danced about her body.

"Black magic!"

Korone took a cautious step back, but Kazuko surprisingly moved forward after her.

"This is not black magic. The Yasakani no Magatama is a secret technique of the imperial family."

Kazuko's hands danced about. The mana spheres danced in response and attacked Korone.

"Unknown attack pattern. Evading only closest activation!"

Korone twisted her body, but an irregularly activated mana sphere dug into her.

"...! Impossible to evade?"

The mana sphere moved as if clinging to Korone's body. Despite being unable to pick up much momentum, it was still able to do damage.

"I will continue dancing until I die and you will continue dancing even

after your death. That is how this secret technique works.”

Kazuko laughed as she danced. Korone may have been a L’Isle-Adam, but it seemed she was unable to withstand the damage. She swiftly opened her bag and threw her own body inside.

“Oh?”

Kazuko’s eyes opened in surprise.

Korone was sucked feet first into the bag. Once everything but a hand had disappeared inside, that hand drew a transfer circle in the air and the bag was sucked inside that circle.

“Quite a skilled L’Isle-Adam.”

Kazuko smiled and turned toward Keena who was crying.

“I see he has died,” said Kazuko.

Keena looked up at her while crying.

“Wh-what are we supposed to do?”

Meanwhile, Fujiko was unable to hide her anger with Kazuko.

“This was your fault.”

"Oh? I do not believe it had anything to do with me. He himself said his actions were due to that dead friend of his."

When Kazuko mentioned that friend, she pointed at Keena's chest.

"F-fweh?"

As Keena cried, she realized her chest was glowing.

"Wh-what is this? ...Pe-chan?"

She pulled out the necklace that hung below her clothes and the light suddenly grew brighter. Peterhausen's fang was glowing.

"Pe-chan..."

The existence Akuto had called a friend had responded to his feelings and was now trying to tell them something.

"Is this...?"

Keena gently embraced Peterhausen's fang and closed her eyes.

She then nodded as if something was talking to her.

"Wh-what is it?" hesitantly asked Fujiko.

Keena opened her eyes.

"He says there's a way to bring A-chan back to life..."

"What!?" shouted Fujiko in surprise.

"The Lord of the Underworld's Coffin," said Kazuko. "That is the name of the device that can resurrect the demon king. It is also the device to bring about his awakening."

"Why does something like that exist?" asked Yoshie.

She had been too overwhelmed to speak before, but she finally managed to squeeze out those words.

"There have been many different demon kings in the past. Some of them have been mentally immature, so the demon king is given a few different trials. That is likely what it is. You could call it a safety measure," replied Kazuko.

"Then is it possible he will not wake up?"

"Yes. Some have died while trying to awaken. Now, let us go. I have been waiting for this."

"Waiting?" asked Fujiko as she turned toward Kazuko.

"Yes." Kazuko smiled. "I have been waiting for a demon king who will work for the empire."

Chapter 4: The Very Last Demon King

"When you were in the virtual alternate dimension, you saw the L'Isle-Adam used to seal Zero?" asked Yuuko.

Junko and Yuuko had left the closed amusement park and spoke as they travelled. Asakusa was not too far from the palace to travel by foot, but Junko insisted they find Keisu first.

"Yes. She was a short girl with a long sword on her back, she wore Japanese-style clothes like a Suhara follower, and her hair was tied back."

Junko explained Keisu's appearance and Yuuko looked confused.

"Zero knows she has that power, right? So why hasn't she been caught if she stands out that much? The L'Isle-Adams are monitoring everywhere, aren't they?"

"Yes, and Zero would have been able to check the old documents to find where Keisu had originally been."

That was only a conjecture on Junko's part, but it would not be too far off from the truth.

"Then won't she have already been caught?"

"No. We know she was originally in the Temple of Megis, but there have not been any reports from there, have there?"

"Well, no..."

"Keisu will not be far from there. If she has the power to seal Zero, she may have the power to hide herself from him."

"Then where is she?"

Yuuko looked puzzled, but Junko had realized a certain possibility.

"The Temple of Megis had to have been sealed off right away, so there should not be anyone inside."

"She's still in there!" shouted Yuuko.

They could not use magic and the public institutions were not running, so the two sisters were forced to head to the city center by foot.

The ground vehicles were not running, so people were walking on the roads. The knights were not present because they had gone to the palace, but fortunately, no one was looting.

"It looks like people are gathering at the palace."

Strangers called out to each other to inform them of that fact. Not even their handheld devices were receiving the news, so they began walking toward the center of the capital just like Junko and Yuuko.

As they approached the center, the roads grew crowded. When they arrived at the Temple of Megis, the area in front of it was as crowded as a flying train platform during rush hour.

Even so, no one was actually trying to force their way into the temple. They would walk through the vast stone-paved entrance area and reach the large glass door, but it was of course locked.

"What should we do?" asked Yuuko.

"We can circle around back," answered Junko. "Last time I was here, there was a door with a flimsy-looking lock there."

Junko's dangerous-sounding comment proved partly accurate. There was a back gate, but it did not look particularly flimsy.

"That doesn't look very flimsy..." said Yuuko just as Junko kicked the gate.

With a dull sound, the gate's supporting pillar bent and the lock came out of its base.

"They do not put very much money into building the temples," explained Junko.

"I see..."

Yuuko opened the broken gate by hand and it creaked rustily.

That large empty building had a unique atmosphere to it. It felt somehow chilly and their footsteps echoed loudly. The Temple of Megis even had a small shopping mall inside, so they felt very alone inside.

"It might be tough finding someone in here."

"Yes, you're right."

Junko began to think. It would take quite a bit of time to do a thorough search, so she needed to come up with some locations Keisu was likely to be.

"She did not seem very smart, so let's check up above," said Junko.

"Up above?"

"Even in the virtual artificial dimension, she descended from the top of a mountain and I doubt she was there from the beginning. She might be the type who always heads upwards. Like smoke."

"That's a mean thing to say about someone you barely know."

"Yes, but something about her makes you take her lightly."

Junko folded her arms.

They pressed the button to ride the elevator to the top floor. A sign informed them there was a cafeteria that overlooked the city there.

"If she really is stupid, that's where she'll be," said Yuuko as she pointed toward the cafeteria.

"Yes," agreed Junko.

They got off at the top floor, walked through the comfortably vast space, and made their way to the cafeteria. As they approached, they heard the clattering of dishes.

"Don't tell me..."

They were in trouble if this was someone dangerous, so they held their breath and peered inside.

Someone was crouched over one of the tables and eating. They were so short that they had to stand in the chair rather than sit. They carried an overly long sword on their back.

"It is safe. This is her," said Junko.

She stepped out from behind cover and into the cafeteria.

Keisu heard her movement and turned around.

She frowned in confusion when she saw Junko, but clapped her hands together when she recognized her.

"Oh! You are the girl I met recently, aren't you?"

Keisu had no sense of the danger she could have been in. The table was covered with fried foods. She had clearly fried up a lot of the food stored in the freezer.

"Why are you happily eating here? "

"I can never turn down a korokke. At any rate, it seems the world has changed a lot. I cannot believe there is no one in the temple. I was beginning to get lonely."

"Are you stupid? Zero was resurrected, so the priests were sent home and put under house arrest. And surely the L'Isle-Adams checked inside here," said Junko.

Keisu narrowed her eyes belligerently.

"I thought I told you I do not like being called stupid."

"This is no time for that. I apologize for the wording I used, but Zero has been resurrected. How do we seal him?" asked Junko quickly.

"By Zero, do you mean the demon king?" asked Keisu with a tilt of her head. "I may not be the smartest, but I would not be sitting around

eating if the demon kind had been revived.”

“You are aware you are not all that smart? ...Anyway, Zero really has been revived.”

“I do not understand why you would claim that. I have a mana link with the demon king you refer to as Zero. If he had revived, I would know,” said Keisu proudly.

“In that case, why have all the L’Isle-Adams been taken over? I thought that was Zero’s power.”

“Oh, that is Zero’s normal power. He has yet to fully revive.”

“What?”

“Once he revives, all humans will be under his direct control. The gods put some of their mana inside people during the ceremony known as baptism, correct? He should be able to use that to control humans just like he controls the L’Isle-Adams.”

“He can do that?”

Keisu had said it so casually, but the idea was so repulsive and terrifying that Junko shuddered. However, Keisu nodded without noticing her reaction.

“He cannot control your mind, of course. But he can make you

apathetic, make you do things you do not wish to do, and otherwise control your actions in general. Zero believes that humans require absolute protection, so his ideal society would be one in which humans do absolutely nothing. Zero's goal is to stop all human activity."

That knowledge must have been installed in Keisu because she explained it all without hesitation.

"Then why is he only controlling the L'Isle-Adams for now?"

"I do not know. Most likely, someone is controlling Zero and this person is preventing him from doing any more."

"Then if 2V is defeated..."

Junko felt sweat dripping down her spine.

"Come with us! We need to seal Zero again!" shouted Junko.

"I can never forgive you."

Fujiko turned a murderous glare toward Issei.

His expression grew serious and he did not smile for once.

"Humans have their beliefs. Not even the black magicians were able to

escape religious belief," he said in a truly dry voice.

"Are you saying the black magicians who wanted to bring about a free society had their own religious belief?"

"Yes. It was the idea that the demon king would save them and bring them that freedom. Pointing that belief towards the gods was a good system. When it comes down to it, humans need a story to believe in, even if it's completely worthless. Reality is filled with worthless things. In a truly equal society, everyone would have the power of the demon king. And if that happened, we would inevitably arrive at a worthless conclusion: we would all kill each other."

Issei looked across everyone there.

Keena embraced Akuto's corpse while Fujiko and Yoshie stood still. Kazuko had already left using transfer magic.

"Then Akuto-sama has no destined mission. He is simply someone with the misfortune to end up with that power."

"He probably realized that himself. Given that, what he did here was quite admirable. Now, go and give him that power. But if that power can do nothing but destroy the world, who can say if giving it to him is a good thing or not. I suppose that means we can only hope he chooses not to destroy the world. This is a safety valve someone has to hold. The great power is simply what comes with it."

"Why did you not reveal all this to the public?" asked Fujiko.

Issei gave a snort.

"Hmph. That would only bring war sooner. He was needed to maintain the story. If he's the demon king, then he's the bad guy."

"But...!" shouted Fujiko, but Yoshie placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go. We can discuss this once Akuto-kun wakes up. Or rather, he will make his decision then. I may have only watched him, but I like him. At the very least, I don't want him to die here."

Hearing that, Fujiko took a deep breath, formed a dignified expression, and turned toward Keena.

"Keena, it is time to go. Lead the way."

"I'm not going to act like this makes up for what I did, but I'll transfer you there," said Issei.

"We will not thank you."

"That's fine. Now, where do you need to go?" he asked Keena.

"Roppongi. Other than that, I only know the latitude, longitude, and distance underground. Apparently, there's an old underground facility there. Is that enough?"

"That's plenty."

Issei nodded and began the transfer.

"Also, send me somewhere near the palace," cut in Yoshie.

"You are not going with us?" asked Fujiko.

"I have to look for Keisu," she said with a nod. "If she hasn't been found yet, I bet she's actually still in the Temple of Megis. I doubt I'll be captured if I go to the capital now. Oh, and it won't matter if they can track my location, so I'll send out the footage from my goggles over the internet. You'll probably be able to see it on your devices."

"Understood. Please do."

Fujiko nodded toward Yoshie and Issei.

And Issei produced a transfer circle.

Hiroshi floated in midair, but it did not seem he would have time for a break. An aerial combat formation was ascending toward him.

"But this is the city."

Hiroshi looked around. People were gathering even within the park on the palace's grounds. He would have to shoot down this formation as close to the palace as he could.

—There are twenty of them.

He checked the number of enemies and the amount of energy he had left. He had yet to enter the field, so his charge was at one hundred percent. However, he still had to avoid using the high energy weapons that required transfer time after use.

"High frequency blade."

Claws made of a special metal extended from his hand. The claws had their cutting power increased by high frequency vibrations, so he did not lose much energy.

"Hh!"

Hiroshi sliced at a nearby one. His suit could fly faster than his opponent could evade, so he easily cut through it.

"Having to think of where they crash makes this difficult."

Hiroshi watched the sliced wreckage fall, but the enemy formation attacked while his focus was elsewhere. Multiple units flew about with strange trajectories.

"But they're running on a program!"

Hiroshi used his gaze to input a command in the multi-display inside his visor. He had the suit predict the enemy's flight pattern and the suit's voice replied.

"Give me a priority list for attacks. I choose not to use lasers."

<Understood. Pattern recognized. If you react within 0.5 seconds of instruction, you can escape. If you react within 1 second, you can exterminate them. It is recommended you choose extermination.>

"I choose the latter. Tell me what to do!"

<Please attack the target indicated by the pointer. Target #1 is...>

Hiroshi did as instructed and attacked repeatedly while splendidly flying around. The enemy seemed to be following a pattern in which three units attacked at once. A fleeing opponent or a slow opponent would have found that hard to avoid, but its effectiveness was halved against someone who could attack faster than the formation. The combat unit could not target Hiroshi, so it could not fire its bullets or beams. The formation was too slow to react to his movements. This was a simple case of their computers being inferior to the suit's computer.

"I can do this! How many flying units are there? Any reinforcements?"

Hiroshi glanced around after shooting down quite a few of them.

And now that he had the composure to do that, he heard the voices around him.

"Way to go!"

"Our hero!"

"Our courageous hero!"

He realized he had never fought before a large crowd before. Just as Lily had said, those voices brought a sense of responsibility bearing down on him.

—So I have to act as a hero.

The responsibility was heavy, but having so many people cheering for him gave him courage more than anything else. That support was reassuring and it meant that many people were united. He decided to call this justice.

—I'm fighting for the people. I carry their desires and fight for them!

Hiroshi felt as if he had come to understand something important.

He cut through the last unit and checked his remaining energy. He had only lost twenty seconds of flight time. That was no problem.

He looked down and saw a giant polyhedron. It was Zero.

—I don't know how to defeat him, but I can buy some time.

The inside of the polyhedron had been made into a virtual alternate dimension and Zero's program was maintained inside. That meant Zero had no physical form. But if most of the data making up his program was destroyed, he would lose most of his functionality. Akuto had defeated the god Suhara in that same way.

"Let's go. I'll use a plasma ball," commanded Hiroshi.

That was the suit's greatest weapon.

Junko and Yuuko watched Hiroshi fight overhead as they struggled through the crowd. They could not move another step forward. They were about to be buried in the sea of people along with Keisu.

"I give up. I cannot move."

"What are you planning to do at the palace, anyway?" asked Yuuko.

She had a point. Junko could do nothing but watch.

"We still need to get Keisu there."

"I cannot move either," said Keisu.

She was completely buried in the crowd. She was even shorter than Junko, so she was currently grabbing at the hem of Junko's clothes.

"We cannot fly without magic, but what about you?"

"I am not equipped with anything as inelegant as that."

"You can't fly?"

"I do not like being mocked."

"Fine, fine. We can move back a bit and look for another way in."

The three girls began moving back toward the Temple of Megis.

"How do you seal Zero anyway?" asked Yuuko.

Keisu appeared to think for a bit and then made an unexpected announcement.

"I do not remember."

Meanwhile, Keena, Fujiko, and Akuto's corpse appeared in a large unknown space.

Technically, it was not completely unknown. They knew its coordinates and depth underground. However, they had no idea what it had been built for. It contained several pillars which were several meters thick and the ceiling was too high to see. Also, a single coffin-like object sat in front of the three of them.

"We are likely the first people in here for hundreds of years," said Fujiko as she looked around.

The only light was placed around the coffin. The illuminated portion of the stone floor contained no dust. That showed that humans had never been there regularly. If nothing fibrous floated in the air, dust would not gather.

This location had clearly been made solely for the coffin. Most likely, only someone who knew what it was could find this place. It did not look like a facility built for another purpose that had been abandoned. The lack of an entrance or exit was enough to know that.

"I assume this coffin is what we want," said Fujiko.

Keena was the only one to hear Peterhausen's voice. It was not his soul because all that remained was the data within the gods, but some kind of connection could be felt in the fact that it only spoke to Keena.

"Don't worry. This is it," said Keena.

She begun struggling to place Akuto in the coffin, but he was too heavy for her.

"Here, give me his head. You take his feet."

Unable to just watch, Fujiko helped.

"Thanks. There we go."

Together, they placed Akuto in the coffin.

The coffin reacted. A mana screen appeared nearby and text scrolled by saying it had activated and what work it was currently doing.

"Is there nothing to do but wait?"

"Looks like it," said Keena.

Fujiko crumbled to a sitting position on the floor.

"Are you okay?" asked Keena.

Fujiko nodded, looked up toward the ceiling, and muttered to herself.

"I cannot help but wonder what I would do if Akuto-sama remains

dead... Yet when he died, I controlled myself oddly well even if I did get a bit emotional."

Keena smiled just a bit.

"I felt the same."

"I want him to be revived. I truly do. But..."

"But?"

"Will this really work? Once he revives, will he really be the same person? And once he revives, will he find nothing but pain waiting for him?"

Fujiko was not her normal self. Keena walked over to her and placed her hands on her shoulders.

"A-chan will always be the same person. He won't be anyone else. I'm sure it's the same for everyone born into this world. He can be revived because he was created, but he will still be the same person. Everything will be fine."

She had no proof and it unpleasantly pinpointed the fact that Akuto's ability to be revived made him even more similar to an artificial human, but it still put Fujiko somewhat at ease.

"Yes. I hope everything will be fine. And if Akuto-sama is the same

person, he will make the same decisions no matter how many times he is revived."

"Just like before, he'll diligently think about what he should do for society," said Keena with a laugh.

The coffin continued its work, but it gave no sign of how long it would take. Every single second seemed to stretch out forever.

"Will this really work?" asked Fujiko again.

"It will. And if you're anxious, you can pray."

Keena's suggestion sounded ridiculous.

"Pray?" repeated Fujiko in surprise.



"Yes, pray. After all, there's nothing else we can do," said Keena innocently.

"That may be so," said Fujiko with a shake of her head. "But to who? A god? They were already-..."

"There is one...I think. If there isn't one, nothing but pain awaits for A-chan even after this."

Fujiko gasped.

"Yes. I suppose belief may be necessary in that way."

Whether it was the evolution of humanity's belief in the gods or it was the real origin of the human soul, lacking belief in it would render the demon kings' lives meaningless.

Keena kneeled next to the coffin and clasped her hands.

Fujiko closed her eyes and prayed to "something".

The coffin quietly continued its work, but no one there knew what was going to happen.

Yoshie complained when she realized she had not been transferred to the temple.

"Dang it. But maybe it can't be helped. The temple might be shielded. Now where am I?"

She looked around and realized she was in the familiar lobby of the

Temple of Megis.

“That makes things a little easier,” decided Yoshie as she approached a window and looked out.

She saw a sea of people that could not be described as a mere “crowd”.

“Those aren’t just onlookers. The wrath of the people sure is scary.”

Yoshie fidgeted with her goggles and set the footage it recorded to be automatically broadcast online.

“Come to think of it, this is even more convenient if I’m looking for Keisu.”

Just as she was about to turn around, she spotted three people moving in the opposite direction of the crowd. In a crowd like that, someone going against the flow really stood out.

“Fwoh! That’s lucky. Are my habits finally paying off?”

The three moving in the opposite direction were Junko, Yuuko, and Keisu. Yoshie had seen Yuuko in various media, so she recognized all three.

She moved to the temple’s entrance and beckoned them over.

"Hey, over here. I'm glad I found you so quickly!"

But all of them looked confused.

"Who are you?"

"Do you work for the temple?"

"You seem somehow familiar, but I do not recognize you."

Yoshie remembered she had not used her real form in the virtual alternate dimension.

"It would take a while to explain in detail, so I'll keep it short: I'm Yoshihiko."

None of them seemed to know what she was talking about. The idea of using a different face in the virtual alternate dimension may not have been as obvious to someone unused to crime or trickery because Junko was much slower to catch on than Fujiko had been.

"I'll explain more later, but I'm on Akuto-kun's side. And it is true that I work for the temple. I helped the priests. Oh, there's an emergency floating escape boat we can use to reach the temple. I can explain on the way."

The three still did not seem to get it, but they had grasped that she was not an enemy. She led them to the release lever for the boat. An

emergency exit led outside midway through the building and a boat was contained within a case to the side of the exit. It sat six and floated using the repelling force of mana. Pulling a lever released it from its moorings.

"I doubt an enemy would go this far," said Junko while Yoshie pulled the lever, but Junko still seemed to have her doubts.

"Please believe me. I do regret what I did, but I really am Yoshihiko."

That comment only seemed to deepen Junko's caution.

"A-anyway, let's get on the boat," said Yoshie as intense light flashed overhead.

Brave Hiroshi had begun battling Zero's polyhedron.

"Getting too close would be dangerous, but we still need to hurry. And I guess I should bring some kind of weapon."

Yoshie tossed in a chainsaw meant to cut through the metal moorings for an emergency release. She hopped in after it and grabbed an oar coated with a film that let it stir up mana.

The other three climbed aboard and Yoshie began rowing.

"That's the guy who defeated the demon king," she said as she looked up at Brave's battle.

"That's right," said Yuuko without mentioning Hiroshi's identity. "I'm sure he'll manage it this time too."

"If he defeats Zero, that's fine with me. That's no problem at all. He looks strong, so maybe he can do it," said Yoshie hopefully.

<Transferring heat resistant cape. Transferring plasma balls.>

A cape appeared on Hiroshi's suit and spheres of plasma appeared around it. They were collections of heat that would melt anything that touched them.

Hiroshi accelerated his suit downwards. The instant after passing through the field that prevented any transfers, he had to destroy that polyhedron. This technique would use up his energy and it would take five minutes before he could use the weapon again. He had to finish this in a single blow.

The cape whipped in the wind and the plasma balls began spinning around his body. He looked like a giant drill spinning through the sky.

<Plasma ball fixture field holding. Time from contact to release set at one nanosecond. Anti-flash visor's visible light penetration rate lowered from 23% to less than 1%. Expanding dimensional fault field. Three seconds until contact with target.>

The suit continued its report.

The glittering polyhedron lay directly in front of Hiroshi. It reflected the plasma and glowed an eerie red, but it quickly grew in Hiroshi's vision.

"Go!"

Once almost his entire vision was filled with the polyhedron's reflections, Hiroshi was sure of his victory.

But he was suddenly hit by an intense impact.

He had no idea what had happened, but everyone in the gathered crowd saw it.

An instant before Hiroshi reached it, the polyhedron had moved like a living creature. It had been fixed unmoving in space, but now its entire form bent and flew toward Hiroshi like a bouncing ball.

Plus, it seemed the polyhedron's mirror-like surfaces were covered by some kind of field. Hiroshi realized it had withstood contact with the super-hot plasma. After he recovered from being knocked away, he righted himself in midair.

<The plasma balls were lost after release. The field they came into contact with is thought to be a dimensional fault field.>

"A dimensional fault field..."

That was supposedly future technology only used by this suit. That was

how the suit could survive being so near the explosion of the plasma balls.

—Why? ...No, the reason doesn't matter. I need to prepare my next attack. ...It isn't going to use "that", is it!?

Hiroshi tried to calm his tense mind so he could think. He ascended away from the polyhedron, but he carefully did so in reverse so as not to turn his back to it.

What Hiroshi referred to as "that" was the dimensional slice. That was another piece of future technology that Yamato Bouichirou had once used. It most likely functioned on the same principle.

And his guess was correct. The polyhedron opened one of its triangular faces outwards and a rainbow-colored beam shot straight up from the opening.

"Kh...!"

Hiroshi evaded it. The space he had been in a moment earlier slid out of place. It was as if the sky itself had been sliced with a utility knife.

"How much energy do I have left?"

Hiroshi checked his remaining energy out of the corner of his eye. He could not use any weapons, but he could open a field to block the transfer of Zero's attack.

"A bit over four minutes left," he muttered under his breath.

And once Zero saw Hiroshi could evade the attack, he changed his attack method. The polyhedron opened all of its faces outwards. It changed shape to a surprising extent like an origami figure being transformed with more folds. The polyhedron transformed into what looked like two plates pressed together and began to spin like a flying saucer. It flew toward Hiroshi like that.

"Analyze pattern."

<Its physical ability is equal to this suit's. It is recommended you transfer control over to the suit. Voice instructions after analysis will not be fast enough.>

"Give control to the suit," said Hiroshi.

The suit forcibly moved Hiroshi's body and carried out unpredictable movements at blinding speed. However, Zero's flying saucer did the same. Zero also intermittently fired dimensional slices. The two objects moved at speeds no human could keep up with as they flew through the air while space continually slid out of place due to the slices.

—Even if I can avoid it, I can't attack after four minutes if I don't have control!

Hiroshi began to panic. Not only could he not attack, but keeping his movements at the limit like this was lowering his energy reserves more

quickly then it could be resupplied.

—Should I flee?

Weakness entered his heart.

But then he heard voices from below.

It was a great earthquake-like roar rising into the air.

The crowd was cheering him on.

“Brave! Brave!”

They were calling his name.

—What...!?

Heat filled his chest.

—Not yet! I haven’t hit the limit yet! I can keep at it until I run out of energy!

“Brave! Brave!”

The crowd filling the roads around the palace had to number in the tens of thousands. As far as the eye could see, the area was crammed full of people and they were all cheering on Brave in his predicament in the sky above. Their voices were so loud one had to cover their ears to withstand it. The volume was enough to shake Junko and the others' bodies as they rode the boat low in the air.

But Junko was staring blankly at Yoshie. Yoshie had explained it several times and Junko had finally realized the truth.

"You are Yoshihiko..."

"I'm sorry. That's why I didn't think it was a big deal for you to strip down," apologized Yoshie while looking up at Brave's battle.

Yuuko and Keisu were focused on watching the battle as well, but Junko lowered her head.

—Th-then...

When Akuto had said "once we get back to the real world, you should spend the day with her at least once" to Yoshihiko, he had been speaking to Yoshie. And when Junko thought back, she remembered them saying something about having a different appearance from reality.

—I was so worried about something that trivial?

Junko began laughing at the ridiculousness of it.

"Wait. Are you okay?"

Yoshie seemed worried, but she spread her arms to say she was fine.

"There is no problem. ...I see. With that in mind, I think we can get along. You act quite differently than you did there, though."

"Yeah, I ended up like that when I tried to act like a guy. Girls like that apparently. But enough about that. I need to tell you about Akuto-kun."

Yoshie went on to tell Junko how that journey had ended.

Junko's expression grew more and more serious as the story progressed.

"So can he be revived?"

"We don't know yet. We can only wait."

Yoshie shook her head, but Yuuko pointed up into the sky.

"Everything will be fine if you wait," she said. "And Brave will finish everything before he gets here."

Yuuko may have been right. Junko had a feeling Akuto would arrive in a situation like this, but Hiroshi seemed to hold that position for Yuuko. And he was currently being cheered on by almost the entire imperial

capital.

"A hero, hm?" muttered Junko.

In that instant, he truly was a hero.

And then the decisive moment arrived.

Light shot up into the sky from below. It was a mana sphere. It flew from the palace and was deflected by the surface of Zero's flying saucer. Someone who could still use magic was assisting Brave.

"Someone can still use magic?"

"Who is it?"

Yoshie and Junko could only ask those questions, but Brave did not overlook the opening.

—Someone attacked from below?

Hiroshi questioned it for an instant, but it did not matter who it was. All that mattered was that it created an opening.

—How much energy do I have left?

He could attack once with the monomolecular wire.

"Transfer control to me! Wire!" ordered Hiroshi.

At the same time, he shot by the side of Zero's flying saucer.

The wire he fired from his hand appeared to simply fly gently through the air, but Zero's flying saucer sliced splendidly down the middle an instant later.

"Did I do it?"

Hiroshi turned around.

He did not have enough energy for another weapon. He could not move at high speed either.

But he did not need to. After being sliced in two, the flying saucer tried to return to the polyhedron but failed. Its triangular parts scattered and fell to the ground.

"I won! It's over!"

An indescribable feeling of satisfaction filled his body.

He heard the pieces of the polyhedron falling to the palace below, but another noise soon drowned that out.

It was of course the people shouting the name Brave.

"Yes!"

Yuuko let out a cheer and clapped her hands.

"Hoo... So it's over."

Junko let out a sigh of relief.

"Well, this resolution is fine too."

Yoshie stopped rowing the boat. They had arrived at the outer wall of the palace. The crowd had climbed over the wall and entered the palace's front yard, but the girls could see what was happening in the temple from their position.

Keisu then looked up in the air and then cautiously to either side.

"What is it?" asked Yoshie.

"He isn't dead," said Keisu quickly.

"Eh?"

"Zero isn't dead," she insisted.

She could likely sense it.

"We know he can't be completely deactivated, but that isn't what you mean, is it?" asked Yoshie worriedly.

"I don't know the details," answered Keisu with a shake of her head.

But before Yoshie could ask another question, an obvious answer arrived.

"Zero's rule and ambition have been eliminated," announced a sudden voice.

It was audible over the praise of Brave, so it could not have been a normal voice. It was being amplified magically and it of course came from the palace.

The person who stepped out on to the palace's terrace was Kazuko.

The people's cheers grew. The girl's image was projected large in the sky so even those in the distance could see her.

"Valiant warrior, I do not know who you are, but you have given us all the courage to fight. It touched me as well. That is why I fired magic on Zero."

The Kazuko speaking to the crowd was of course 2V.

"Oh, no..."

"It cannot be! She is taking it this far!?"

Yoshie and Junko recognized 2V, so they knew that was who this was.

"Where is the real Kazuko-sama?" asked Junko.

Yoshie shook her head.

"I don't know. She's on the run from Korone who was being controlled by Zero."

"If Kazuko-sama is killed, 2V is the empress? Is that what she is after?"

"But Kazuko-sama was really powerful. I don't think she'd be taken out so easily. Is 2V lying now to survive?"

Junko and Yoshie questioned the situation, but no one in the crowd knew of 2V.

"However, the magic all of you used cannot be recovered. The gods most likely died along with Zero. I am announcing now that I shall once more stand at the center of the empire. I swear I shall bring back magic

and I shall directly govern as empress until the gods of the temples have been revived! Please help me rebuild our empire!" announced 2V loudly.

"She can't do that. The imperial constitution says..."

Yoshie began a legitimate argument, but her small voice was drowned out by the overwhelming cries of the crowd.

"Long live Kazuko-sama! Long live Kazuko-sama!"



Their voices piled atop one another and spread out around the temple.

The people were supporting "Kazuko's" declaration of a dictatorship.
They were passionately supporting it.

"Wh-what are they thinking? Until now, the people had believed in the gods and made their own decisions in life," said Junko blankly.

"It might be specifically because they believed in the gods. They've sensed how weak the system that relies on the gods is. At the very least, they now know Zero was the first demon king. In other words, they've given up on the priests," said Yoshie.

"But it was the priests that actually fought back. These people would not have done anything to fight the control over them if Brave had not called out to them."

"That's how it works with groups. We're the same. There have been times when we should've said something but didn't. And we've believed in stupid things," said Yoshie with a nod.

"But once they know the truth...it will all work out, right?" asked Junko with a pale expression.

No one could answer her.

Only the cheering for Kazuko could be heard.

Meanwhile, 2V felt true joy and waves of satisfaction over accomplishing her goal.

"How about that, Zero? This is what people are! I've proven that people are insane! They stood up to escape oppression, but now they're shedding tears of joy and begging me to be their oppressor!" she said quietly to Zero.

"But that will not last long. They will eventually come for your head. And then they will seek a new ruler. That is how I determined humans are insane," said Zero calmly.

"I agree with you there, but I wanted to bet everything on it and prove it myself. I wanted to laugh at the stupidity of every imperial citizen."

"Did you devote your life to that because you are one of those stupid citizens?"

"You can think of it that way. Either way, only death awaits me after doing something like this. But I've set up some countermeasures to live as long as I can. ...Now, let's end this world while I'm still drunk on joy. Zero, release your power now."

"This is why I obeyed you. I have been waiting for this."

"Here it comes!" cried Keisu as her ears and hair twitched like an animal's ears.

"Here comes what?"

"Zero. I sense Zero awakening."

Keisu looked around, but there was of course nothing there.

"2V is using magic. She must be causing his awakening," said Yoshie as she looked toward 2V through her goggles.

She could see the flow of mana with them.

"Then if we defeat 2V...!"

Junko looked up into the sky where Hiroshi was.

"Please!"

Yuuko clasped her hands up toward the sky.

But Hiroshi was slowly descending.

—I'm out of energy... And the field preventing me from transferring more is still active... This was a trap!

Hiroshi clenched his teeth.

He had of course recognized 2V and he knew he had to defeat her.

But...

—Could I kill 2V even if I had the energy?

He was both regretful and thankful that he was out of energy.

Most likely, he would not have been able to do anything. The people were still applauding in their direction. There was no way he could kill their empress before their eyes.

He would be killing Kazuko who the people loved and supported. He did not fear the act itself. What he feared were the angry cries of the people and the never-ending talking behind his back. Even if it was his duty to do so, he would have hesitated.

—This means Zero is still alive. What is going to happen!

"It's no good. I think he's out of energy," said Yuuko as she looked up in the sky.

"What will happen if Zero awakens?" asked Junko again.

"Everyone who has been baptized will have their ability to think taken by that system," answered Keisu.

"But then it's all over!" cried Junko.

Ignorant of this, the people continued to give cries of joy. Most likely, those cries would remain unchanged once Zero awakened. 2V would use Zero's power to have them worship her.

"Keisu, please do something!"

Yoshie shook Keisu, but the small L'Isle-Adam merely tilted her head and could not think of anything.

"Now this empire is forever mine!" cried 2V.

She spoke loudly enough for the people to hear.

She received passionate shouts in response.

"Praise this empire which will continue for a millennium!" shouted 2V.

Suddenly, dark clouds arrived.

"Clouds?"

Shadows fell over the crowd. The people looked up into the sky and saw ominous dark clouds hanging over the palace.

"Why are they so isolated?"

"What is going on?"

The crowd began muttering.

Thunder roared. It was loud enough to drown out the people's voices.

Voices of fear now came from the people.

No rain fell. The clouds produced only repeated lightning and thunder.

"What?"

2V looked up.

They had yet to find Kazuko, but there was no sign of her having entered the palace. The priests had made it inside, but they could not use magic and were having trouble with the combat machines 2V had given permission to kill. That left only one option.

"The demon king."

He was floating.

His silhouette was visible in the flashes of lightning.

The screaming crowd grew silent.



A male form covered in a dark glow stood in midair. If the light

surrounding him had been white and his expression had been filled with kindness, everyone would have thought he was a saint. However, he was the polar opposite of that.

Black glowing wings of light grew from his back.

His body was wrapped in bulging muscles that gave him an ominous appearance.

His face contained a brutal smile and fangs were visible within his mouth.

His eyes glowed a brilliant red.

"Foolish people who wish to obey this empress, if you can regain your lost freedom in obeying, then do so. But if you wish for freedom and for power, then I shall give it to you," said the demon king.

He spread his arms wide and the people began to mutter amongst themselves once more.

"My magic power..."

"It's returned..."

"Thank goodness," said Junko as she looked up in the sky.

"Yeah, I can use mana again."

Yoshie tried gently wrapping mana around her fingertip and the fingertip did indeed glow.

"I wasn't talking about our magic," said Junko as she trembled and rubbed her face.

"I know. He's back. But he certainly looks different."

Yoshie grinned bitterly.

Yuuko trembled in fear when she saw Akuto, so Junko placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. He hasn't changed on the inside. I can tell from what he said. He intends to take it all onto himself."

"Take it all onto himself?"

"That's right. He will...end it all," said Junko.

In that instant, lightning shot down toward the terrace on which 2V stood.

With a tremendous explosion, half the palace terrace was blown away without a trace.

2V's body fell before everyone's eyes as a black carbonized mass.

After a few seconds of silence, screams of fear and anger rose from the people who had grasped what had happened. Those screams gradually spread throughout the palace yard.

But the demon king only laughed loudly and spoke.

"You may have defeated Zero, who I sent ahead of me, but he succeeded in killing the gods. Why do you think that is? It was so I could give everyone the power of magic equally. And why did I kill your empress? It was to destroy the current world order. Now, do you wish to serve someone? Or do you wish to live for yourself? The time has come to choose where this world is headed. This is the final war and I am this world's last demon king."

Chapter 5: The Bloody Empress

2V walked through an unknown passageway behind the palace.

It connected to the secret room she had once lived in.

No one knew of its existence anymore. It had been quite a long time since 2V had been there.

2V was alive.

"It was very cautious of you to use a doll resembling your real self even then," said Zero.

Zero now had a L'Isle-Adam body. That body had an inhumanly beautiful face from which all humanity had been eliminated.

"Didn't I tell you I was prepared? And it is true that I am willing to have my life come to an end here. I will live as a recluse now, so you can do as you wish. That demon king managed to interfere with your power, but you intend to oppose him, don't you? I will watch as you do."

Akuto seemed to have the ability to oppose Zero's seal on the gods' power. That may have been why they were both known as a demon king.

Once their conversation was complete, Zero continued further into the palace.

2V headed in the opposite direction, but someone stood in her path.

"Aren't you forgetting about someone?"

2V looked up in surprise.

A girl wearing a stylish hat stood there.

"Lily Shiraishi, right?" said 2V lightly.

"That's right. I figured there was an escape route no one knew about, so I made a thorough search of the palace. That's what I've been doing since this attack began. After all, I knew you would never let anyone capture you." Lily grabbed the brim of her hat and reversed it. "I can finally use magic again, so I'm gonna go all out from the beginning!"

Lily immediately charged forward.

"Tch!"

2V created several mana spheres around herself and moved her hands to control them. This was the magic of the imperial family that Kazuko had used.

"You have multiple mana attacks that can cause physical blows, but I just have to throw enough punches to outnumber them!"

Lily threw countless punches forward. 2V guided the mana spheres, but Lily's extended fists struck each and every one. The special mana spheres dealt physical blows even while stationary, so this was a comparison of strength.

"Ohhhhhh!"

Lily's fists were deflected by the mana spheres, but she still managed to send in a great number of blows. For each sphere, she sent in ten blows. It was a tremendous number.

And 2V began to be pushed back.

"Kh...!"

2V's magic power lost to Lily. The mana spheres vanished and the countless fists slammed into her slender body.

"Doraaaah!"

Lily swung her fists and slammed 2V into a wall.

2V groaned while pinned to the wall.

"Gh...!"

"Hah. I won't kill you, so don't worry. If I don't have proof of your identity, I can't bring back the previous system. Despite my grudge, it would be better if I left you alive. Killing you would essentially accomplish your goal."

Lily extended an arm with magic power and lifted 2V up by the collar. From 2V's expression, one would have thought Lily had said she would kill her.

"Stop. Please stop."

"You've vaguely realized it, haven't you? People aren't as stupid as you think they are. If I reveal the truth, they'll be able to make an intelligent decision. I won't let you escape into death to avoid seeing something you'd rather not."

Lily gave a cruel smile.

And at that moment, a dull noise rang from 2V's body. Lily felt the impact through her hand.

"Wha-...?"

Lily's eyes opened wide.

A glowing sword was stabbed through 2V's body.

"Ghah!" groaned 2V as she coughed up blood.

"What...?"

The glowing sword had flown in from the side.

And after it pierced 2V's body, it disappeared as if turning to dust. It had been formed from mana. Not many magicians could maintain that much power while sending mana long distance in a non spherical form.

Lily was shocked when she turned toward where the sword had come from.

Kazuko walked elegantly toward her.

"Kazuko-sama..."

"Don't you feel sorry for her? She was asking for death herself. She has been hiding in the darkness without directly speaking with anyone for so long, so we need to at least give her a nice dream in the very end."

Kazuko walked over to 2V.

2V was still breathing.

"D-damn you..." groaned 2V.

Kazuko kissed her twin sister.

The mouth and cheek of Kazuko's beautiful face were stained with blood.

But Kazuko continued smiling and looked on 2V with a kind expression.

"You poor thing. You wanted to be like me, didn't you? Did you gain your wish in the end? If so, I will kill you before that nice dream comes to an end."

Kazuko fired a mana sword into 2V from close range.

2V convulsed.

"A-are you sure you should do this?" asked Lily.

Kazuko's entire body was stained with blood and she jabbed her right hand inside the wound her mana sword had left in 2V's stomach. She moved her hand around a bit, found the heart, and pulled it from 2V's body.

"K-Kazuko...-sama..."

Lily was left speechless.

Kazuko tilted her head slightly as if to say she was doing nothing out of the ordinary. She then held the heart in both hands and began to eat it with perfect etiquette.

"Oh, it is quite like a large dried plum."

"Wh-why?"

Kazuko smiled gently as Lily backed away.

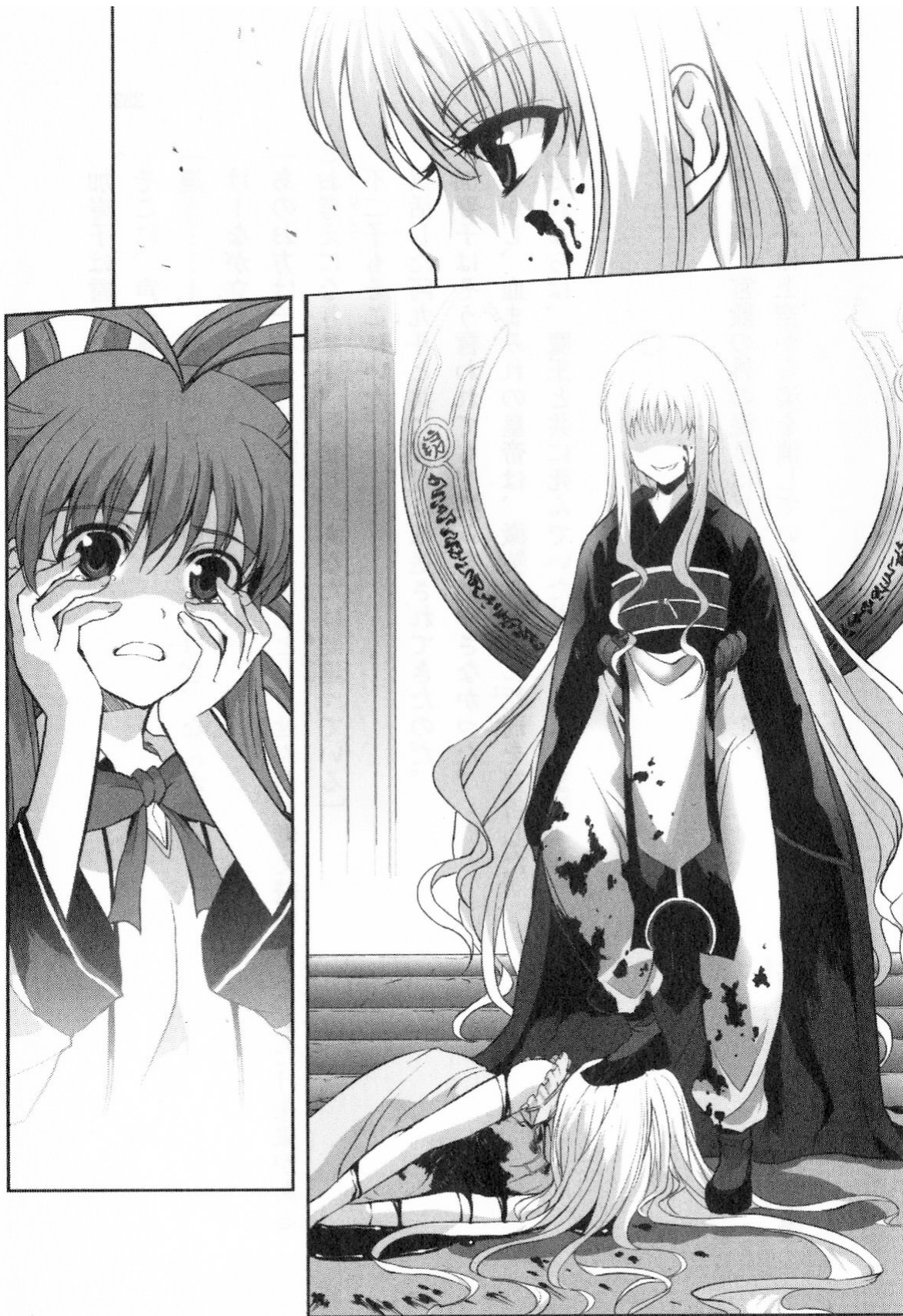
"I have taken in her mana wavelength. The power that was meant for me ended up with her. It is called Yata no Kagami and it allows one to transfer their consciousness into L'Isle-Adams and dolls."

"And eating that means..."

Sweat flowed down Lily's brow.

"Yes. By taking that power, I plan to take responsibility for what she has done. Zero is working in the name of the empress. For the first time in thousands of years, it is time to bring back the rule of an emperor," announced Kazuko.

"What...?"



Lily did not know what to say.

"With Zero and the demon king working for the empress, magic has been unified. Everyone can live in a happy society ruled by the empress," said Kazuko.

But another voice cut in.

"No! I don't know the details, but that's wrong!"

Keena stood there.

"He will not allow you to bring an end to all thought like that. He thinks that the future lies in continuing to think. In other words, you are wrong."

Fujiko was there too.

They had been transferred to the palace along with Akuto.

Despite the protests, Kazuko's smile remained.

But as she smiled, the bloody empress announced an execution.

"In that case, you will have to die along with the demon king."

The confusion outside the temple reached its peak.

Akuto had disappeared from the sky, but the people were fleeing in fear. Some were using their resurrected flight magic or the flying cars that could be used once more.

Among them, Yoshie, Junko, and Keisu headed for the palace. With her magic back, Junko leaped from wall to wall while holding Yoshie. Keisu followed behind.

Yuuko had stayed with Hiroshi once he descended. His energy supply had apparently returned, so he could fly away with her.

"So what was that?" asked Yoshie.

She referred to Akuto's actions. Yoshie had not known him for long, so she could not figure out why he had done what he did.

"He intentionally made everyone hate him. That is the kind of guy he is," explained Junko.

"Why would he do that? Is there any advantage to it?"

"That is just who he is. He is trying to save everyone by carrying all the negative legacy himself. I could tell from the way he tried to act evil. He plans to bring an end to these wars over the demon king once and for all."

Junko's words were passionate and her usual liveliness had returned to her eyes.

"So he's going to defeat Zero and oppose the empress? Fwoh! I had guessed some of it, but this is getting interesting!"

Yoshie smiled and looked up at Junko's face as she carried her.

"What is it?" asked Junko when she noticed.

Yoshie grinned.

"I just realized how much you've fallen for Akuto-kun. It's gonna be tough being interested in someone like that, y'know?"

"I-idiot! This is not the time for that!"

"Fine, fine. Now, let's go throw away our lives for an interesting guy."

Yoshie laughed.

"So 2V has finally died."

On a road with a good distance from the center of the capital, Kento smoked a pipe while resting his elbows on the roof of a parked ground car. He sighed as he sensed a disturbance in the mana he was tracing.

"The limiter the gods placed on magic has been removed. The age has come where people can use magic with no thought to morality. Now, which side should I join?"

Kento climbed inside the car with the pipe still in his mouth.

“Bouichirou had to have considered this as a possibility. He left behind Zero’s body and that suit, but I need to search for something else that he left behind.”

Kento went by the codename USD and he was the man who had once been called the strongest magician.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

We are already at Volume 8. I'm not sure if this is part 2 of the story or the beginning of a new story, but here it is. If you have yet to read Volume 7, you should go ahead and do that.

This was another development that even I found unexpected. The characters are really starting to drag me around. I have a feeling the next volume will be really exciting.

And I can also inform you of an upcoming anime adaptation.

As those of you who bought this book new saw on the advertisement, it will begin airing on Chiba TV and other UHF stations starting in April. As you know, UHF stations are where "anything goes", so you can expect it to be quite excessive.

The main staff has Watanabe Takashi-sama as the director, Kobayashi Toshimitsu-sama as the main character designer and chief animation director, Yoshioka Takao-sama as story editor and scriptwriter, and Akahoshi Masanao-sama as scriptwriter! It's a lineup of veterans, so I can only say I'm really excited. If I had to explain why I'm excited, I would say I'm looking forward to "a true prank of adults". I've met all of them and spoken with them, but I could sense something shining in their casual comments. I know they're going to betray my expectations in the best possible way! Please look forward to it. I'll be looking forward to it the

most.

Of course, the drama CD from Beatniks Inc. is on sale. The voice actors will change for the anime version, but just think of it like the double cast you often see in stage performances. That can make for a good habit.

Also, Itou Souichi-san's manga version is running in Champion RED. I heard him say he's going to charge forward with it, so I believe he's going to keep going for quite a while. It's been really amazing lately.

And lastly, my thanks...except I'm out of space. I give my thanks to everyone involved and to the readers who have supported me. I hope you continue reading from here on. There's still a lot to enjoy!





いちばんうしろ
大魔王
ACT9





「あれが君の言っていた物語が」

「そっだ。物語を打ち消す、大きくて、愚かな物語だ」



登場人物紹介

はっとりじゅんこ 服部 絢子

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

さいあくと 紗伊 阿九斗

将来「魔王」になると(再び?) 予言された「善良な」主人公。初代魔王ゼロ+皇帝という強力な敵との決戦に挑む。

まとうふじこ 江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指し暗躍する。

もが 曾我 けーな

阿九斗に懐いている天然少女。お米が大好き。果たしてその正体は……?

みわひろし 三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と匿衛を行なう人造人間。しかしゼロと2Vによりコントロールを奪われてしまう。



木多瀨恵

2Vに騙され、ゼロ復活の
一因を作ってしまう。阿九斗の
ことを気に入り、その後は協力
する。



リリオ

コンスタン魔術学院生
徒会長。帽子がトレード
マーク。瞋嘩っ早く
「小さい」と言われる
と切れてしまう。



加寿子

帝国を統べる皇帝。
2Vの力を吸収し、初
代魔王ゼロを支配下に
置く。皇帝のみが使用
できる3つの強力な魔
術を操る。



けいす

ゼロと共に仮想空間内
にいた小柄な少女。
ゼロを封印する力を持
つ唯一の存在。

Prologue

The red-haired girl did not know where she had been born.

Yet by the age of two or three, she already knew who she was.

"I am me."

In her understanding, that meant she was no one else but herself.

That may have been why that dangerous thing took a liking to her.

It came from somewhere, joined with a human, definitively changed that human, and took no responsibility for its actions. It had no form, was undetectable, and could not be proven to exist, but it had the same type of mind as a human. Or rather, it was nothing but that mind.

She met it before she turned four.

She had moved from a kind person's house, to an orphanage, and then to orphanage after orphanage. Amid it all, she had begun to speak with someone. She would speak into empty air and laugh at a response no one else could hear. Those around her noticed, but they thought she simply had an imaginary friend like many children her age did.

However, she truly was speaking with what appeared deep within her eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I am no one, but I will become you."

"Eh? But I'm me."

"That too is correct."

"Hm. Then will there be another one of me?"

"Yes. I will be with you."

"Really? Then I won't be lonely anymore!"

"Unfortunately, you will be alone."

"Why? You won't be my friend?"

"I will be you, so I will not be your friend. It is very sad, but you will always be alone. No one will understand you and you will go somewhere far away."

"I don't want that. I don't."

"It has already been decided. You are a special existence. You are more

special than a four leafed clover or a male calico cat."

"I'm that special!? I never understood why I was alone, why I have to keep changing homes, why the adults bow down to me, and why it seems like they're making fun of me, but I guess it's because I'm special. ...But I don't want to be alone."

"You will always be alone, but do not worry. You can make one friend. Whenever you have a problem, just cry. If you do, someone will come to save you."

"I just have to cry?"

"Yes. That is how the world works."

That conversation had been their first meeting.

Afterwards, the red-haired girl lived with, spoke with, and was guided by it. Her life of moving from orphanage to orphanage did not change, but she had few problems due to the guidance of the voice.

She eventually forgot about it as she grew up, but that could also mean it had truly become a part of her. Even so, she would sometimes be driven to action by its words. One such incident was when she saw a certain boy. He had a twisted look to his face and he had a mature atmosphere for his age, but the word "cry" appeared in her mind when she saw him.

She cried and cried and he gave her a hair decoration.

"Is that how it works?" wondered that red-haired girl named Soga Keena.

Why was she in this environment? Why was she being moved from orphanage to orphanage? Why was she special? Why had she been born? Her questions quickly caused her to freeze up.

She tried to tell the boy how she felt, but she could not form the words properly. As she hesitated, he spoke as if he understood why she was crying and he left.

Keena understood that had been a destined meeting.

But when she put on the hair decoration, she forgot all about it.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Final Battle

Sai Akuto looked down on the scene below as he floated in midair.

A great crowd surrounded the palace. As far as the eye could see, the ground and the sky were filled with people. Those were the people who had stood up to Zero's control via the L'Isle-Adams. Protesting with their pure hatred was fine, but the problem was their sudden support as soon as Empress Kazuko declared her own dictatorship.

—That left me with no choice.

Akuto had just announced he was the demon king. Doing so and defeating Zero and Kazuko was the only way to free the people. Zero had been awakened and used by 2V, but Kazuko was now the one controlling him. Zero had been used to fill the people with unease and Kazuko was taking advantage of that unease.

—I will use this power to its fullest.

By dying and resurrecting, he had gained his power as the demon king. It was a frightening fact and even he did not want to believe it was true, but he had been created as both a human and a weapon. He was created to retain the emotions and sense of self of a human while having unlimited control over the power of the gods known as magic. That meant he was perfectly sane. He fully understood how much power he had and what was possible for him, but he did not go mad with power or fear his power.

—If they were going to make me into a demon king, they should have

given me the ability to truly go nuts with the villain act.

Akuto silently complained.

However, he had to keep up the act on the outside.

“This artificial creation that claims to be a demon king may have driven fear into the people, but I will show you that only one may hold that title!” he shouted.

He felt a painful wave of emotions swell up from below. The vast crowd turned all of their anger and fear toward him.

Akuto could feel it all because he could now view the logs saved within the gods. Those logs converted people’s emotions into data and then into words. Akuto’s brain was directly connected to the gods, so he could sense how every individual had lived their life in the past. He could tell what each and every one of them had eaten for dinner three years ago.

—This power... It’s like I can read their minds. I really can become a god or a demon king. And it’s because I am a normal person like everyone else that I can become either one. All of the past demon kings must have stood in this same position and made some kind of decision. Just like me, they must have wanted to set the people free and they must have worked to sound like a demon king.

“Fill yourselves with rage and terror! Give me more and more! That is what powers me!”

He was making up demon king-like things to say, but even if they were lies, he could sense himself being tugged toward being a demon king as he spoke. If he was not careful, he could truly end up that way. He had to be doubly careful to remain sane.

—I need to stay calm. I need to analyze the information and think about what to do next.

The ability to know how other people lived gave him an unimaginable amount of information. He could read the past actions and emotions of every single person in the crowd, so he knew exactly how they felt about the current situation and what he had to do.

—They believe the empress is the only one who can save them from Zero's rule. And they think I am using the confusion to defeat both Zero and the empress.

It was true Zero had tried to take over mankind after awakening, but the one using the confusion to make a grab for power was Empress Kazuko. However, the people fully trusted Kazuko. She was the empress, she looked benevolent, and she used gentle actions.

Her title and appearance were enough for the people to trust her even though they actually knew next to nothing about her.

—I need to defeat Zero. The empress too. And I need to destroy this ridiculous story everyone believes in. I'll destroy the concept of the emperor and the demon king.

With his mind made up, he felt a sort of resolution.

And he saw a single person float up from the crowd below. He wore a special suit and was viewed as a hero by the people.

—If he defeats me in the end, the story everyone believes in will meet its demise. And once that happens...

In the past, Miwa Hiroshi had done nothing but hesitate, but Akuto sensed a definite resolution in him now. He was flying off to take Hattori Yuuko to safety, but he would return.

Either Lily Shiraishi's appeal to him had worked or Yuuko's actions had given him courage. Now that Akuto had awakened, he could sense the flow of emotions Hiroshi had experienced.

—After I am gone, I can leave everything to Hiroshi!

Akuto turned toward the palace terrace. A single L'Isle-Adam had appeared there.

It was a male L'Isle-Adam with a majestic build. That was the body given to the program known as Zero. He looked up at Akuto with emotionless eyes and expressed his thoughts.

<You too are nothing more than a combat machine. Why are you so intent on eliminating me?>

Zero's words sounded like a provocation, but that may have simply been Akuto's interpretation. It was possible Zero meant it as an honest question.

Akuto responded without speaking.

<It is true I am also an artificial being. But I have something fundamentally different from you. I have the sense of self of a living creature. I have a human heart. Your heart and your emotions are like pouring a different color water into a bucket of water. You are not independent individuals. However, I am me. In the same way, all humans are independent people. I cannot let you melt us all together.>

<It is because you are split into individuals that you cannot be controlled. My master feels the same way.>

<Your master? You mean Kazuko?> asked Akuto.

A bright voice joined in.

<Correct. I am sure you already know due to your power, but I have taken 2V's power.>

That voice had a ring to it that would put anyone at ease and make them smile. However, it sounded like the alluring voice of a succubus to Akuto. Just listening to her voice made him want to agree with everything she said.

<If you are controlling Zero, then I don't see why he needs to be

defeated,> said Akuto cautiously.

Empress Kazuko remained hidden deep in the temple and spoke telepathically.

<That is true. Yes, very true.>

Kazuko agreed, but it did not mean she completely agreed with Akuto.

<So let me defeat you,> she continued in a grinning voice. <That should convince the people, don't you think?>

Akuto grimaced.

<And you'll rule over them all afterwards?>

<Yes. It is quite simple, isn't it? The situation has changed, but I will keep my promise. As long as you obey me, I will not kill you and I will guarantee you a comfortable life.>

She spoke as if the thought of someone disagreeing with her was unthinkable.

Akuto clicked his tongue.

<It's all about you, isn't it?>

But Kazuko showed no sign of caring. She tilted her head as if cutely making a request.

<Yes. This is a selfish demand, but will you please listen to me? Or did you only pretend to listen earlier? Were you planning to betray me after you defeated Zero? You should not play dirty like that. People will think you are a bad person.>

Kazuko smiled and Akuto replied with anger evident on his face.

<I don't care if they do. And if you already understand, there's no point in hiding it: I am opposed to what you're doing. You changed your mind and began to protect Zero because your rule will be more convenient with the gods around. If Zero is defeated, the gods will lose their very foundation.>

<Oh, what a smart boy. In that case, have you realized that what I want is not all that different from what you want? You want everyone to know who you truly are. It is the same for me,> said Kazuko with no hint of fearing Akuto.

Akuto knew what it felt like to want people to know who you truly were.

But his true essence was the polar opposite of hers.

<If your identity as empress is just an illusion and is nothing like your real self, then cast it aside and go live your real life!>

<That is not happening. I am a greedy person. I am by no means a

human and kind empress, but being empress is convenient. Casting that aside would be a waste. I will use that identity. And haven't you used your identity as demon king for your own convenience?>

<Sorry, but I don't see it as convenient. I want this to be the last time I use my powers,> answered Akuto.

Kazuko's response did not arrive until after a short pause.

<I knew this would happen, but it seems our negotiations have failed.>

<We had no common ground to begin with.>

<In that case, every imperial citizen is your enemy. Now, let us begin. I am not interested in watching a farce, so please make it a grand performance.>

On Kazuko's signal, Zero jumped up from the palace terrace.

Akuto took a defensive stance, but Zero's jump took him away from Akuto. He stopped in midair a good distance away and ripped away the artificial skin on his arms to expose the internal machinery. Akuto watched on in confusion as countless L'Isle-Adams floated up from below and gathered around Zero. They gathered around his body by attaching to his exposed arms.

As if setting up building blocks, Zero created a giant body for himself.

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

Akuto grimaced.

What finally stood before him was a 15 meter giant with exposed machinery.

"What a pain. Do I really have to have a fistfight with this thing?" he complained.

"That combination into a giant form isn't meaningless. At first glance, it does look like the product of some silly belief that a steel giant is a symbol of power, though."

That comment came from Kita Yoshie. She had a habit of getting overly excited and she currently had her goggles lowered as she analyzed Zero's new form that had appeared in the palace yard.

"You mean there is a meaning to that?" asked Hattori Junko.

They had been flying above the crowd in a floating boat, but they had arrived at one of the palace's terraces after making their way over the wall.

"Even with the demon king or Zero, it all comes down to a struggle over the resource known as mana. And that struggle isn't fought in the real world. It's like running a program; their processing power decides who

wins.”

Yoshie turned back on the terrace as she explained.

“Does combining increase his processing power?”

“Yes. It lets him use parallel processing. Normally, Zero would be worse off because the demon king can use all of the resources, but this form might give him more processing power.”

“Then, how does the demon king... How does Akuto get processing power?”

“He isn’t a machine, so he uses his human brain. However, our magic system is created to react to human imagination and human emotions. Even if he’s losing in the struggle over power, he should win when it comes to using magic. His passion will win in the end. Fwoh! This is so exciting!”

Junko glanced over at Yoshie, leaned out over the terrace, and looked down.

“The onlookers have run away.”

Zero’s transformation and the hint of an upcoming battle had caused the crowd near the palace to leave, so the only ones on the palace grounds were Junko, Yoshie, Keisu, and those inside the palace.

"What? You don't find this exciting? I guess I can see why. We came all this way, but the situation has changed and Keisu can't remember anything. It does feel like we've accomplished nothing."

Yoshie looked over at Keisu whose shoulders were drawn back.

Keisu was a short samurai-style girl with a ponytail. She was the only L'Isle-Adam not under Zero's control and she held the secret to sealing Zero, but she had done nothing but travel alongside them so far.

"I am truly ashamed that I cannot remember anything," apologized Keisu.

"No, it's fine. Just try to remember if it comes down to it."

Yoshie rubbed Keisu's head.

Keisu seemed to find it ticklish and she looked up at Yoshie.

"You sure are kind, boss."

"Boss?"

"I ask that you let me call you that. I offer you my life."

Yoshie gave a broad smile.

"Fine. As long as you feel this helps you in some way."

"It looks like we might have to protect Keisu first," said Junko nervously.

Yoshie turned toward the inside of the palace and her expression stiffened when she saw who was there.

Kazuko had appeared inside a palace corridor.

"That is Keisu, isn't it?"

Kazuko spoke kindly and walked elegantly toward them, but she was stained with blood.

"Your Majesty... That is... human blood..."

Junko had fought on a battlefield before, so she could distinguish between demonic beast blood and human blood by the smell. However, Kazuko showed no concern.

"Ho ho ho," she laughed quietly. "I was merely handling a bit of a complex domestic issue. I am embarrassed you had to see the evidence of the fight."

"...!"

Junko let out a wordless gasp. She felt instinctual fear toward Kazuko.

"Oh, my. Do not look at me like I am insane. At the very least, I am more confident than anyone else that I am sane."

As Kazuko spoke, an abnormal aura rose from her body. It was different from a flash of mana. It was a collection of emotion similar to killer intent and it seemed to freeze Yoshie and Junko in place.

"She is..."

"Dangerous..."

The two girls began to sweat and they could not move properly.

In an instant, a voice seemed to wake them up.



"Let Keisu escape!"

The voice came from behind Kazuko and Junko recognized it.

"Keena?" she muttered.

That distraction allowed her to move once more.

And then a mana sphere shot toward them. When Junko blocked it with her sword, the mana sphere rotated around the sword as if stuck to it, but the instant it touched the blade, it split in two like a jelly confectionery.

"What?"

Junko was surprised to feel a bizarre sensation not present in normal mana spheres.

Kazuko had fired the mana sphere and it had flown directly toward Keisu.

Kazuko opened her eyes in interest.

"You cut the Yasakani no Magatama!? That sword was given to you by the gods, wasn't it?"

"It was...but what happened?"

Junko was confused. Some technique she was not aware of had been used.

That confusion made Kazuko grin.

"My attack could not have been destroyed otherwise, so I was just making sure."

She raised her hand to fire another mana sphere.

"Not good!"

Junko quickly turned toward Yoshie and Yoshie took action before Junko could warn her.

"Run, Keisu!"

Yoshie activated her chainsaw and climbed up onto the edge of the terrace.

"But I dislike fleeing," grumbled Keisu.

Yoshie decided to change her wording.

"I'm going to jump down, so protect me."

Yoshie then toppled off of the terrace and disappeared over the edge.

"Boss!"

Keisu leaned over the terrace.

She could see Yoshie falling.

"I am on my way!"

Keisu jumped down after her.

After seeing that, Junko held up her sword and prepared for Kazuko's mana sphere.

But the attack never came.

"You still have not given up?"

Kazuko had stopped moving and she was looking down. Someone's hand was wrapped around her leg. It was not simply grabbing the ankle. An entire forearm was stretched out like rubber and wrapped around the entire leg.

"As long as I don't think I've lost, I won't lose even if I die."

It was Lily Shiraishi. Her body was lying on the ground a few meters from Kazuko. She had clearly been struck many times because her clothes were torn to pieces. Her boyish face was horribly swollen, so she had obviously been punched quite fiercely. Even so, she stretched her arm out toward Kazuko.

"Yasakani no Magatama."

Without even turning around, Kazuko held her hand back and fired a mana sphere toward Lily.

"Tch!"

Lily returned her arm to normal and slowly stood up.

But it did not appear she could move faster than the mana sphere.

"Watch out!"

Junko ran past Kazuko and stood in front of Lily. She used her momentum to swing the sword and instantly cut down the mana sphere.

"President! What is going on?"

Junko had reacted as she saw fit, but she did not have a proper grasp on the situation.

"Well, you could sum it up by saying the empress was the mastermind," answered Lily with a sarcastic smile. "She took out 2V and is now trying to eliminate those of us who know the truth."

She said it so simply and Junko did not think she was lying.

Junko's expression stiffened and she turned toward Kazuko.

The empress laughed.

"Ho ho. You make me sound like a horrible person. Then again, you were telling the truth, so I suppose it can't be helped."

Junko frowned.

"I despise you, Your Majesty."

Kazuko laughed that off as well.

"Some thrones cannot be won without becoming despised. We cannot have peace otherwise."

"Are you saying the people want someone to sit on the throne?" asked Junko without thinking.

Kazuko nodded.

"Didn't you hear them cheering?"

"Kh."

Junko was unsure what to say.

"Give it up," cut in Lily as she stood up on unsteady feet. "She isn't going to listen. More importantly, what are you going to do if those that escaped tell the truth?"

Other than those present, Etou Fujiko and Soga Keena had both witnessed Kazuko killing 2V and they were nowhere to be seen.

"That's right. Where are Etou and Keena?" asked Junko.

Lily grinned.

"Keena quickly stripped off her clothes and Etou-kun ran off at the first opening while I fought."

"I see. So that's it."

Keena was able to turn invisible. She became undetectable even by those who could sense mana. However, she could not turn her clothes invisible as well, so she had to strip naked. That must have been why Junko had heard Keena's voice earlier.

Kazuko narrowed her eyes in suspicion while listening to the comment about Keena, but then she shook her head as if to clear those thoughts.

"Whatever they have done, I can find and silence those who have fled."

Kazuko held up a hand.

With the sound of mana, a sword of light appeared.

"Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi."

That was the name Kazuko gave to the two meter sword of light that appeared in midair.

It glowed as if a portion of the sun had fallen to the earth. Even at a distance, Junko could feel the heat radiating from it.

"Watch out. That's really powerful," warned Lily who had seen 2V pierced by one of those swords.

"Okay. I have the perfect defense."

Junko held her sword in front of her eyes and twisted it slightly to the left. This defensive stance let her immediately cut in any direction.

"That isn't what I meant! Its power is-..." cried Lily.

"It is too late." Kazuko narrowed her eyes. "I will pierce both of you at once."

Kazuko swung her hand and the sword of light flew toward Junko.

"Ee!"

The power of the sword could be heard in the roaring of the sliced air and the tremendous rumbling of mana. It was created from mana, so it should have had an upper limit to its power. However, the heat and waves emanating from the sword were much more intense than anything Junko had seen before.

"I can't stop this!"

Junko was unable to move her sword. If she had tried to block it, the sword's blade would likely have been cut in two. It would have then stabbed through Junko and Lily behind her.

But with a roar, Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi passed by Junko to the left.

The sword stabbed through the palace wall behind them and the heat melted the area around the hole. Most frightening of all, it had produced almost no noise even as it had stabbed into the wall. That meant it had melted the wall with almost no resistance.

"She missed..."

Junko took a breath.

Junko knew better than anyone that she had not evaded the attack. The path of the sword had been off from the beginning.

This was due to Kazuko's stance having crumbled. In the instant she fired the sword, something must have struck her because she was down

on her right knee.

Junko spotted a shining hair decoration floating behind Kazuko.

"Thanks," said Junko quietly.

That hair decoration belonged to Keena. The girl must have tackled Kazuko just before she fired the sword.

Lily also breathed a sigh of relief, but she shook her head because she could not let her guard down.

"She missed, but it won't happen again. She seems to like tormenting others, but she started using that sword once you showed you could cut her mana spheres."

Kazuko stood back up and shook her head. It seemed she had realized what Keena's power was.

"So one of you can turn invisible. But that is only a small problem as long as you have no real means of attack. I will not miss this time."

Kazuko swept her hands around her to make sure Keena was not nearby.

"What was that sword or those spheres?" asked Junko as she turned toward Lily.

"Techniques only those of the imperial bloodline can use. With 2V's ability to control L'Isle-Adams, there seem to be three in all."

"Only those of the imperial bloodline?"

"Using them is the proof that you are part of the bloodline. Their use is a symbol of authority."

"So that is why those attacks are so powerful."

Junko understood Lily's explanation, but that meant the next attack would finish them off.

"You run away. I'll hold her here as long as I can," said Lily.

Her expression did not look remotely tragic. It was as if this were only natural.

Junko shook her head.

"I cannot run off after you say that. And I have made up my mind as well. I left his side based on my own feelings once. As long as he is risking his own life here, I cannot leave. I do not want to regret my actions like that again."

Junko's expression did not waver. Now that she understood what was happening, she knew exactly what Akuto was trying to do. He was literally betting his very existence on defeating Kazuko and Zero.

It seemed Junko's expression was enough to tell Lily who "he" was. Lily grinned and lowered the brim of her battered hat to look away from Junko.

"How old-fashioned. Well, I won't say anything tasteless, but it's meaningless if you don't win. I hope you're ready to be known as the killer of your empress," said Lily.

Junko nodded firmly.

Kazuko laughed as she listened in.

"The killer of your empress? I have a hard time knowing how to respond to something as ridiculous as that," she said calmly.

She raised a hand, compressed some mana, and produced another sword of light.

Junko's legs froze in place when faced with that overwhelming presence, but she had to think up a way to fight now that she had made up her mind.

"I'll disturb her with movement!"

Still holding her sword up, Junko seemed to slide forward and then she leaped to the side.

Kazuko moved her head. From her point of view, Junko had to have simply vanished.

She finally caught sight of Junko, but Junko leaped in the opposite direction.

But even though she could be seen jumping to the side, she was also still standing in that spot. Two Junkos now existed. This was the duplication technique she excelled at. She created other one of herself out of mana and this duplicate really was physically there.

“Iga Ninja Art – Scattered Moonlight!”

In the end, there were five versions of Junko and they all leaped around Kazuko as if trying to confuse her.

Kazuko was unable to focus on any one point.

The five Junkos used that as their opportunity to attack.

“Yaaaaah!”

All of the duplicates had physical forms thanks to the mana, so they were not simply illusions. That meant they could all attack. The five of them attacked with slightly shifted timing to prevent Kazuko from evading.

But...

"You created duplicates from mana? That method is useless against someone with precise control over mana," said Kazuko calmly.

She lightly waved a hand.

"Wha-...!?"

The Junkos were dumbfounded.

The Junko in front of Kazuko's hand had vanished. She moved her hand further and more and more of the Junkos disappeared.

"Tch!"

But Junko did not let up. Once the four duplicates were gone, the real Junko swept her sword horizontally and tried to cut at Kazuko's side.

"Ohhhhhh!" she cried out.

But her shout was cut short. She suddenly stopped the swinging of her sword.

Kazuko was directly facing Junko and the tip of the glowing sword in her hand was pressed up against Junko's throat.

"This is how you fight with magic."

"What? Impossible..."

"No, this is was inevitable. At least be glad you were killed by someone greater than the gods," said Kazuko with a grin.

Kazuko suddenly lurched to the side. It seemed Keena had tackled her again while invisible. But that was all that happened. Kazuko had been wary of Keena and Keena was not all that powerful. With a look of annoyance, Kazuko swung a hand through empty space. Junko heard an impact and a scream.

All the while, the tip of Kazuko's sword of light did not move from Junko's throat.

"There is nothing left to interfere."

"Ee..."

Junko's eyes opened wide in fear.

Kazuko gathered strength in her arm to stab Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi.

And...

The entire temple grew dark as if the power had gone out.

Kazuko's hand stopped. Junko doubted she was the type to lose her cool just because it was a bit dark. Plus, it was still daytime, so the light coming in from outside was enough to see with.

"W-was I saved?" muttered Junko as she leaped backwards.

Kazuko's sword was losing its physical form.

"The mana in this space is reducing."

Kazuko pointed her palm upwards, used magic, and saw that it only caused a slight change.

"Is the mana in the atmosphere being reduced?"

While wiping away her cold sweat, Junko checked her sense of the surrounding mana.

"The energy supply is being reduced at the same time," added Lily.

Junko was regaining her calm. She realized that, given the situation, it was entirely possible she could successfully fight back against the empress.

"This lowers my physical strength too, but I have a chance if neither of us can use magic!"

Junko charged toward Kazuko again.

Kazuko evaded with a back step.

"Zero is absorbing the mana and energy. No... The demon king can probably do that too."

Kazuko looked out the window.

"Boss, that was not fair. You could get down on your own."

"Of course I could. I'm not going to do anything stupid."

Yoshie had stabbed her running chainsaw into the wall which had slowed her fall and allowed her to land safely on the ground.

Keisu had jumped after her, passed by her midway, and landed first. Yoshie had been forced to dig her out where she had sunken halfway into the soft ground.

The two of them were watching Akuto and Zero's battle while making sure no one had followed them from the palace.

After transforming into a giant humanoid machine, Zero filled half of their vision as they looked up.

Akuto looked like a toy doll compared to Zero.

However, they felt equally powerful to Yoshie.

"How strange. Their sizes are so different, but they give off a similar aura," she commented.

"But the flow of mana is different. Look."

Keisu pointed toward Zero.

Zero's long arms spread to the left and right. The sound of his arms slicing through the wind rang out and the compressed atmosphere burst outward, but that was not all.

"Mana? ...Oh!"

Yoshie lowered her goggles and checked her surroundings. The goggles visualized the flow of mana.

The colored mana spread through the air like clouds. And if those had been real clouds, it would have meant a typhoon had descended low in the sky. Mana was being sucked into a whirlwind around Zero.

"Fwohhhh! That's one hell of a cyclone," muttered Yoshie.

The rotating mana produced an air current that blew Yoshie and Keisu's hair about. As the surrounding mana was stolen, a physical storm appeared. Starting at the palace, buildings began to go dark in an expanding circle. All mana-powered devices became unusable and the people could not use magic.

"This looks like a scene from the apocalypse. A dark giant devours all and battles an angel that cast himself out of heaven. A modern day Armageddon is playing out before our eyes. We have to watch this. This could be the beginning of a true hell."

Yoshie grinned as the storm raged.

—So he combined to absorb mana.

Akuto grasped Zero's intention. By breaking down and recombining countless L'Isle-Adams, he had taken in a large amount of mana and gained the processing power needed to control it. However, he could not use complex techniques like a human. He could only use brute force.

And that was what he used. His fist let out a groan as it flew toward Akuto. The fist was wrapped in a storm of mana.

—I can't do anything if that hits me.

Akuto controlled the flow of mana around him. He could not defeat Zero in the physical struggle between mana or the struggle over gathering an energy supply of mana. That meant he had to fight by

minutely controlling the mana and turning aside his enemy's power.

Kakei. Constant Magic Academy's headmaster had taught him that fighting style and this would be similar to using it on a larger scale.

The coming attack was like a small crashing airplane and Akuto evaded it at the last moment. He controlled the turbulent flow of mana and altered the direction of that giant power with the smallest necessary amount of his own power.

<You cannot resist forever. I am absorbing the surrounding mana and there is a limit to how much you can use. There is no need to prolong this.>

Zero's comment was surprisingly considerate.

<Why are you saying that?>

<My objective is to control mankind. I have no need to eliminate you if you do not force my hand.>

<You mean you aren't completely controlled by the empress?> asked Akuto.

The empress was definitely trying to kill him, but Zero said he was not.

<My top priority is protecting mankind,> answered Zero.

<So you obey her as long as her orders don't conflict with that protection,> realized Akuto.

<Precisely. I wish for as efficient a conclusion as possible. Without wasting energy, I wish to reduce mankind's numbers to the point that they will not destroy themselves.>

The two of them held a strange conversation as they fought. But it was the fight that brought them close enough to confirm each other's goals just between the two of them.

Akuto understood now.

<In that case, we are destined to fight, aren't we?>

<This is nothing more than consuming energy. It is impossible for you to eliminate me.>

Zero too seemed to have come to an understanding. He swung his giant fist once more.

<I wouldn't be so sure.>

Akuto moved toward the giant fist that passed by his side, placed a hand on one of the giant fingers, and focused mana in his hand.

"Hahh!" shouted Akuto.

The smallest of Zero's fingers burst at the second joint that Akuto pressed his hand against. The finger broke apart as it fell to the ground.

Zero drew back his fist and moved away from Akuto.

<You used my mana.>

Zero analyzed the situation as he observed the exposed machinery of the finger. Akuto had taken the mana stored in Zero's body and transformed it into explosive power.

<This way, I don't need all that much mana for myself. I can make up for our difference in size,> explained Akuto.

However, this method required great concentration. This mana was being controlled by Zero. To take that control away and place it under his own control, Akuto had to accurately focus on moving each piece of mana. He had his abilities as the demon king, but this was an issue of pure mental focus.

Zero of course understood what Akuto was doing.

<You will reach the limit of your non-mechanical body.>

Zero swung his giant fist toward Akuto again.

—Kh!

Akuto deflected it and flew back to escape.

He waited for an opening at a distance.

Zero's fists used a combination attack that did not befit his giant form.

Mana was meant to be used by a human body. That meant mana was most efficiently used by someone with two arms and two legs like a human. Even if he was a machine, Zero's fighting style resembled martial arts and he did a splendid job of making efficient attacks using his two arms.

He swung his long arms and legs and the hands and feet at the end easily broke the sound barrier. His fists compressed the air and a conical cloud of steam exploded out around the fists to add power to the attacks.



But the timing and openings of his attacks were essentially the same as in martial arts.

—In that case, I have no choice but to answer in kind!

"Ohhhhhh!" roared Akuto.

He clenched his fist and shot forward.

His opponent was ten times his height, so the difference was greater than that between an adult and a child.

Even so, he succeeded in starting a fistfight.

It was a stationary fistfight. They both stopped still in midair and fiercely swung their arms and legs at each other.

Zero sent surefire strikes toward the center of Akuto's body.

Akuto used repeated attacks that slowly but surely tore away Zero's body.

There was an overwhelming size difference between the fists and their fighting styles were completely different, but it was still a fistfight.

Zero predicted Akuto's actions and tried to punch at the central axis of his body.

Akuto deflected the fists, turned them aside, and punched at their sides with his own fist. The action was similar to repeatedly passing a thread through the eye of a needle at high speed.

Zero's processing power clashed with Akuto's mental strength. This was a competition to see which one would win out.

Zero attacked once for every few of Akuto's attacks, but he accurately targeted Akuto, forcing Akuto to use mana to defend in all directions. This gradually wore down Akuto's focus.

Meanwhile, each of Akuto's attacks tore at Zero's fists little by little.

Would Akuto's mental strength run out first or would Zero's body crumble first?

The metal and plastic of Zero's parts and the glow of mana scattered from where Zero and Akuto's fists clashed. That showed how they were both being worn down mentally and physically.

Hiroshi returned to the sky above the palace and felt a chill run down his spine when he saw Zero and Akuto's fistfight.

—Is he planning to die?

In everyday life, a thought like that may not have been too serious, but it was frightening when viewing a fight like this.

—I noticed him looking at me. But...

Hiroshi's body stiffened with a feeling similar to fear.

—He really is planning to leave everything to me!

Hiroshi understood that. Akuto had once tried to destroy the system of the gods. His intentions were unlikely to have changed. That meant Akuto wished to destroy Zero. However, he did not want to bring chaos to the world. His goal was to eliminate the existence known as the demon king. His goal would not be achieved unless he and Zero destroyed each other.

Hiroshi had fallen partially into a daze, but he came to his senses when he heard voices down below.

He could not make out the words, but they were clearly cheering him on. They were cheering for Brave. He looked down and saw the people watching the battle from a distance. They had noticed his presence.

—There's something I have to do.

He knew he could not expect the people to bring this situation under control. He was still a hero.

He looked up into the sky where the two demon kings were literally tearing away at each other as they fought. Akuto seemed to have noticed Hiroshi's return and he gave a single glance toward Hiroshi.

—I understand... In fact, I already did.

Akuto's glance told Hiroshi everything.

"Boss, the battle is coming to an end."

"So it's almost over."

Keisu and Yoshie whispered to each other as the fistfight clearly approached its conclusion.

Zero had lost a large portion of his body and Akuto had received a fair bit of damage from the blows his mana had failed to defend against.

"I think the next strike might decide it," said Yoshie.

She then looked to the side because she heard someone stepping on the grass.

"It can't be..." she said in surprise.

Kazuko was walking over to them and she was dragging someone behind her with her right hand. She was displaying unbelievable strength for her slender frame.

But even more surprising was whose limp form it was Kazuko was dragging.

"Hattori Junko... Don't tell me you...killed her..."

Yoshie could barely force out the words, but Kazuko gently shook her head.

"Without mana, I can only strike her directly. It takes quite a lot to kill a human."

Kazuko then let go of Junko's arms. Junko collapsed limply to the grass and let out a quiet groan.

"She's still alive."

Yoshie was relieved, but the situation was not headed in a good direction. Yoshie stepped back so as to stand protectively in front of Keisu.

Kazuko smiled.

"So I decided to wait until later to kill her. I will focus on Keisu first. I must see this L'Isle-Adam who can seal Zero."

Kazuko took a slow step forward.

Yoshie flinched back, but Keisu pushed her aside and stepped forward.

"I will handle this."

"No, wait."

Yoshie was conflicted.

It seemed Keisu was able to function normally without mana, so she could easily handle a normal human. However, Kazuko had the strength needed to drag Junko with only one arm. Kazuko had to have been artificially altered just like Akuto. In that case, the outcome of a fight was unclear. And Yoshie could not allow Keisu to fight unless victory was assured.

—I'll have to find a way to do it myself.

Yoshie made up her mind and began to step forward. However, the chainsaw felt quite heavy in the current situation.

"Ho ho. How very reckless of you."

Kazuko laughed and took another step forward.

She did not seem concerned at all. In fact, she looked away from Yoshie and up into the sky.

"Oh, my. The situation is changing by the second. And it seems this will end in an unexpected fashion."

Yoshie also glanced up at Akuto and Zero's battle.

The two of them were continuing to fight while completely battered.

However, that was not what Kazuko had been commenting on. A single line of light shot in from the edge of Yoshie's vision.

It shot straight up toward the battle.

"What is that?" asked Yoshie.

"Brave, the demonic beast slayer. In other words, that is the enemy of those with the name 'demon king'," explained Kazuko calmly.

"You don't mean he's planning to take out both of them, do you?"

Yoshie's eyes widened in surprise.

Brave shot straight toward where Zero and Akuto were fighting.

Yoshie pulled down her goggles and had them display a magnified image of Brave.

She saw Brave equip his cape. High-temperature plasma balls then appeared around him. This was Brave's most powerful attack.

Her goggles analyzed the image and concluded the attack did not use mana. They also told her a mana canceller was in effect around Brave, so mana was unusable within a few meters of him.

"Does that mean there's no way to defend against this attack!?" cried Yoshie.

At this rate, Zero and Akuto would both be destroyed.

"If Zero and the demon king are eliminated, I will need to think up a new plan. After all, losing Zero will make the gods unusable," said Kazuko.

"But...!"

Yoshie tried to argue, but she could not form the words.

Akuto was risking his life to destroy Zero instead of sealing him. Hiroshi understood that, but that did not guarantee he would not carry out Akuto's wishes by eliminating both of them.

"Ahh..." groaned Yoshie.

While surrounded by the plasma balls, Brave shot through Zero's back and into Akuto.

Brave had become an orange glowing line of heat that sliced apart that scene of intense fighting.

Zero and Akuto had already worn each other down and they now seemed to freeze in place like a still image, but Zero exploded a moment later. The explosion enveloped them both and they disappeared into the

sea of orange light.

It looked like a small sun had appeared in the sky.

Yoshie was wearing her goggles, but it was so bright that even she had to look away.

After the ball of flames finally faded away, giant pieces of wreckage and a single charred body fell from the sky. Brave then slowly descended into the palace yard.

"Ah... Ah..."

Yoshie was completely dumbfounded.

The giant pieces of wreckage clearly came from Zero, but that meant the charred body was...

"Well done."

Kazuko spread her arms in welcome as Brave descended.

He landed before her and she nodded.

"I must thank you for defeating the demon king. You must be the mysterious hero that has been talked about recently."

"Yes, that seems to be what people are calling me," said Brave Hiroshi calmly.

"Then can I assume you were fighting for the empire's sake and for my sake?" asked Kazuko probingly.

One side of Brave's mouth rose in a smile. Only his mouth was left exposed by his mask, but that was enough to show off this daring expression.

"No. I wasn't fighting for this empire or for you individually. I just feel the need to do something when people are crying."

Kazuko's expression twitched slightly.

This was the first imperfection in her always calm expression.

"Who are you? And why are you wearing such a dangerous suit?"

"I'm sure you've figured out who I am underneath this mask. But while I wear this suit, I go by the name Brave. That is all I am. And I have two goals: justice and peace."

"Ho...ho ho." Kazuko laughed at Brave's answer. "Ho ho ho ho ho! That is most amusing. How can someone who used to be nothing but a cowardly student act so full of himself when all he has is borrowed power!?"

"That isn't quite accurate. There's no such thing as power you take for

yourself. Most of the time, you're either born with it or someone casually gives it to you. Either way, you never asked for it. The proper way to live your life is to behave in a way befitting of that power even if you have to force yourself."

There was no hint of hesitation in Brave's voice.

"Are you saying you do not intend to obey me even though you killed the demon king?" asked Kazuko with a slight tremor to her voice.

"No, that isn't it."

Brave shook his head.

"Then what-...?"

"You will obey me," he said. "You will give us back the lives we had before."

"What?"

Kazuko was speechless.

"Zero has been destroyed, so return society to the way it was. That is all I have to say," added Brave.

All expression vanished from Kazuko's face, but a charming smile

appeared an instant later.

"Oh ho ho ho ho ho! You are the first person to ever speak to me like that! But aren't you overlooking something? The mana has yet to vanish! That means the gods are still functioning."

Kazuko produced a glowing sword in her hand.

"What are you doing?" asked Brave just as she swung the sword.

The tip stopped just in front of Junko's throat as she lay groaning at Kazuko's feet.

"This girl is still valuable as a hostage, if nothing else. Isn't that right?"

"Is this all you have, Your Majesty!?"

Brave swung his hand. He must have activated his mana canceller because Kazuko's glowing sword vanished.

"No. I have much more than that."

Kazuko picked Junko up, took a small jump backwards, and turned a cold smile in Brave's direction.

"I think you are the one that is out of tricks. You fell for the same trap twice."

A virtual alternate dimension field suddenly appeared, surrounding Brave from a distance. That field cut off that space, so Brave's suit was unable to transfer in energy from another dimension. This was the strategy 2V had developed based on her knowledge of the suit, but Kazuko should not have known about it.

"Wait... Did you obtain 2V's memories too?" asked Yoshie who had seen the related series of events.

"Precisely." Kazuko then turned toward Brave. "Your energy will not last long now."

But Brave kept his head firmly raised.

"Either way, I just needed to know what your true intentions were. I'm not as stupid as you think."

"What? There is nothing left you can do. Your mana canceller is no longer in effect."

Kazuko produced another Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi in her hand.

"But now that you are not a threat, it is no longer necessary for me to kill you. Accept your position. The people have high expectations of you. You can show off your justice under my rule."

"And if I refuse, you'll kill Hattori Junko?" asked Brave threateningly.

"Who can say? It is all up to you now," said Kazuko cutely.

But Brave boldly puffed out his chest.

"I thought I told you I'm not as stupid as you think."

He raised his hand.

Kazuko took a defensive stance, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Heh. What do you think you are doing?"

"I will enforce my own brand of justice. As long as they aren't evil, I have no problem with demon kings," said Brave with a grin.

"You don't mean...!?"

Kazuko leaped away.

An instant later, a dark shadow swiftly cut through the space she had been standing in.

"You tricked me!"

Kazuko's expression had clearly changed now.

The dark shadow smoothly scooped up Junko and rose to its feet.

"He didn't actually trick you. He really did char my body," complained Akuto.

He looked like a dark shadow because the surface of his body had been carbonized. The black surface peeled away and smooth skin finally appeared beneath.

"This is the last time you make a fool of me," said Kazuko in a low voice.

In the exact opposite of before, this new voice struck fear in the heart of anyone who heard it.

However, the same shining smile remained on her face. In fact, it may have been even brighter than before.

"I will slaughter all of you," she announced as she waved her hand.

The entire atmosphere around Kazuko seemed to tremble.

Yoshie gasped as she sensed the change.

"This is a mana burst!" she shouted.

This technique sent the mana out of control until the mana itself

exploded and came apart. This was not used in magic. It only ever happened by accident. The explosion it created would destroy any material related to mana.

"This will destroy her along with everyone else here!"

"Has she gone insane!?"

Akuto and Brave both shouted out, but Kazuko only sneered.

"No. Zero can perform a magical transfer at the last second. I alone will survive! Demon king, you can likely survive as well, but your human brain does not possess the processing power needed to transfer everyone here."

"Are you making him choose who to save!?" shouted Yoshie as she moved in to protect Keisu.

But Keisu did not react to Yoshie's action. She stood perfectly still.

"...?"

Yoshie looked down at Keisu and found that the look in the L'Isle-Adam's eyes had completely changed. Keisu then spoke smoothly in a completely different tone of voice from before.

"Zero is entering his second stage. He is leaving his fixed body and switching to network infiltration mode. Please immediately transport me

to Zero's true body."

"Wh-what are you talking about? Did you remember what you have to do?"

When Yoshie spoke to Keisu, Keisu returned to normal and nodded toward Yoshie.

"I remember now. Zero is-..."

But Kazuko cut her off.

"You may remember, but it is too late."

The empress smiled.

The earth began to sink down as if tremendous pressure were pressing down on it. In a circle a few meters across, the ground remained around Kazuko, but everything outside began to collapse and fall down. And then the scope of the damage began to accelerate outwards.

"Begone," declared Kazuko coldly.

In that instant, the area filled with light.

From the sky, one would have seen a sphere of light a kilometer across appear at the palace. It reached several hundred meters into the sky and

was visible from a great distance.

The light did not remain for long, but no survivors remained once it vanished. Nothing but a giant crater could be seen.

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Moon

When Junko came to, she realized her injuries were healed and she stared at her own hand.

She seemed to be up in the sky. She looked down at the surface far, far below. She saw the city and the crater torn from it.

She could tell she was not ascending into heaven because she felt warmth in her body. She looked up and saw Akuto right there.

"Ee!" she shrieked without thinking.

When Akuto noticed she was awake, he nodded and spoke worriedly.

"Oh, you've come to. Are you okay?"

"Y-yes..."

She looked away in embarrassment and went over the situation in her head, but then she recalled Kazuko and Akuto's conversation before she had lost consciousness.

"Y-you did not choose me as the one person you saved, did you?"

A frightening thought entered her mind. Kazuko had predicted Akuto would only be able to transfer a few people. And that meant...

"Well..."

Akuto gave an embarrassed smile.

—Do not tell me you really did!

For an instant, Junko trembled in joy. She had never thought he would choose her from among all those people. But her delight was immediately followed by fear of all of the people who had died and of her own self-righteousness.

"D-do not tell me you really did only save me," she said in a trembling voice.

"No, I transferred everyone else too," said Akuto with the embarrassed smile still on his face.

"Everyone else?"

"Everyone in the range of the blast," he said casually.

"You transferred all of them?"

Junko's voice cracked a bit and he nodded.

"I tried it and it worked. I grasped everyone's position, searched for a safe place for all of them, and transferred them."

Surprisingly, not a single person had died in the giant explosion in the center of the imperial capital. The explosion had covered an area a kilometer wide and it had left behind nothing but a giant crater, but no one had died.

There had of course been a large number of people around the palace where the explosion had occurred. All of those people only remembered seeing the scenery before their eyes change. A moment later, they had seen the explosion in the distance. After thinking for a second, they had realized someone had transferred them to safety.

But they had no way of knowing who had done so or how.

“Is that even possible?”

Junko could not believe it.

There had been tens of thousands of people there. It was beyond amazing that he could have grasped each and every person’s location. And to then transfer them all would have required truly unbelievable mental strength. It was similar to grasping the location of each and every grain in a box full of sand and then moving them elsewhere one at a time.

Kazuko had caused the mana burst because she had believed it was impossible for him to do so. She had assumed Akuto could only transfer a few people.

"Well, I managed it. I transferred the others not far from here, but I took you with me because you were unconscious. I went ahead and healed your injuries."

Akuto made it all sound perfectly normal.

"S-so that is what happened."

Junko was relieved, but she also felt a bit disappointed.

"Anyway, let's head down to the surface where I transferred the others," he said before beginning to descend.

He moved horribly slowly and Junko grew incredibly embarrassed over how he was holding her against his body. She may have felt a bit guilty about her previous thoughts.

"U-understood. B-by the way, could you let me go? I can use flight magic," suggested Junko.

But Akuto shook his head.

"Sorry, but could you put up with this for now? If you move away from me, you won't have enough oxygen. I'm gathering oxygen and heat around me. Also, the mana isn't dense enough here to use normal flight magic."

He sounded unsure what else to say.



"We are that high up? But then shouldn't we descend more quickly? You could do it in an instant, right?"

Junko squirmed as she spoke.

"The thing is, I wanted to have a private chat with you."

"Eh?"

Junko looked up at him in surprise. He averted his gaze awkwardly and actually looked like a teenage boy for once.

"Wh-wh-wh-why are you acting so differently all of a sudden?"

His strange behavior left Junko feeling flustered.

He then began speaking in a slow apologetic voice.

"I can fully use the power of the gods now, so I can view the records of other people's lives."

"Eh? Wait a minute. Are you saying you saw the records of how I have lived?"

She started to panic.

He nodded awkwardly.

"Sorry. I wanted to apologize in private."

"Y-you idiot! That is like peeking!"

"Th-that's why I'm apologizing. But I only saw what was related to me, so..."

"That is bad enough! D-d-do you mean you know what I have done while you were not around?"

Junko blushed and shook her head back and forth.

"Yes. ...I'm not sure what to say."

"Waaaah! Stop! And does that mean you know how I feel?"

"Yes, it does," answered Akuto with a small nod.

Junko let out a high-pitched shriek and covered her face with her hands, but Akuto remained silent. She had either resigned herself to what was to come or she was completely desperate because she spoke up in a trembling voice.

"Then... Will you accept me?"

"Of course," he said with a perfectly serious expression.

"Eh...? Eh...?"

Junko spread her arms and looked up at Akuto with a look of disbelief. Tears formed in her eyes and her lips trembled in joy.

"Th-then you...you..."

She wrapped her arms around Akuto.

"Don't worry. I will protect you. I know you rebelled against the empire because you sympathized with my ideals," decisively stated Akuto.

Junko realized this was heading in an odd direction, so she loosened her arms.

"W-wait. I sympathized with your ideals?"

"Eh? Didn't you? You were cautious of Yoshie-san, but once you met her and spoke with her, your mental state changed. You gained the will to fight."

"A-about that..."

Junko trailed off.

That was due to what Akuto had said about Yoshie and Junko getting along. Yoshie was a girl, but Junko had first met her in the virtual alternate dimension where she went by the name Yoshihiko and looked like a guy. Junko had thought Akuto was saying she should get to know "Yoshihiko" as a boy.

That had nothing to do with his ideals. Junko could only assume Akuto understood nothing about what she had been thinking.

And Akuto confirmed her suspicions with his next decisive statement.

"You spoke with Yoshie-san, heard what I planned to do, and agreed with me. That is why I fought here in order to live up to your expectations."

"You said you saw what I did, but was that all you saw? You didn't see what I do in bed each night or what I mutter to myself when no one else is around?" asked Junko quickly with a complicated expression.

Akuto looked confused.

"No. I didn't look at anything private. That would be rude."

"Ha...ha...ha ha... Right. Of course you wouldn't."

Junko laughed while half in a daze.

"By the way, were you worried I would see something strange?"

"No, no, no! Of course not! I do not do anything like that! N-now, we need to hurry to the others. I get how determined you are."

Junko then exhaustedly looked up into the heavens.

"Are you okay? Are you in pain or are you cold?" asked Akuto when he noticed.

"I am fine. But let me hit you."

Junko then swung her fists down on Akuto's head again and again.

"Ow, that hurts. My body may be sturdy, but I still feel pain," complained Akuto.

"I do not care! Just let me hit you for a bit!" shouted Junko angrily as her fists gradually gathered more and more strength.

"If he managed that transfer, it means the empress was wrong about his power," said Yoshie as she stared at the distance crater in admiration.

"Did A-chan really do that?" asked Keena.

She was wearing her clothes now. Her removed clothes had been transferred along with her.

They stood on the roof of a building from which the remains of the palace were visible. Yoshie, Keena, Keisu, and Hiroshi had been transferred there. Hiroshi had been transferred along with the rest after his suit had run out of energy.

"He's the only one who could have. It's hard to believe it was possible even for him, but I know he would try to save everyone."

Hiroshi sounded somehow embarrassed as he spoke.

"Saving everyone there makes him sound like a god. But that's exactly why no one will think the demon king did it," said Yoshie as she looked down at the ground.

The roads were filled with the people who had been gathered at the palace. Yoshie could not hear what the people were saying, but they likely believed Kazuko had saved them.

"This was pretty much a miracle, so you can't really blame them."

Hiroshi did not bother disguising his voice around his group.

"As impressive as that was, we have some questions we need to ask."

Yoshie suddenly turned toward Keisu.

Keisu nodded with a serious expression she had never shown before. Her tone of voice was also more business-like.

"My memories have returned and it was likely due to Zero's awakening. My brain seems to be linked to him."

"So that's how it works. And what do you mean when you say he awakened?"

"It is called his second stage. He has no central object he controls and instead becomes almost entirely fused with the gods."

"What do you mean?"

"The Zero we have seen so far is nothing but a terminal. By abandoning that terminal, his core can begin making its way into the gods' network."

"We heard Zero acts as the core that makes the gods the gods, so are you saying that core is taking over the gods like a computer virus?"

"That sums it up well enough."

"How do we seal him? If that's what his second stage is, is there an anti-virus program we inject into the network?"

"No. Zero's true form – that is to say, his sense of self – is fixed in the location of his birth. I must suppress that sense of self. That is how he is sealed," explained Keisu.

"His sense of self?" asked Yoshie while tilting her head.

"Think of it as what makes you aware of your identity as yourself and what is located at the center of your thoughts. The gods and L'Isle-Adams

do not inherently have a sense of self. Zero is the only artificial intelligence that has one and his sense of self is what supports the gods' autonomous thoughts. I must suppress that sense of self. However, that sense of self is a black box, so direct physical contact with Zero's true body is needed." Keisu pointed at herself. "I must touch him and suppress his sense of self. I will link with the body surrounding Zero's black box. You could say I am a component of Zero, so I have the ability to essentially put his sense of self to sleep."

"I see," said Yoshie with a nod. "So we need to go where Zero was born. Where is that?"

Keisu moved the finger she had used to point at herself. For some reason, she held it straight up.

"Up? Is something coming?"

"I don't see anything."

Keena and Yoshie were confused because they could only see the bluish-white moon visible in the daytime sky.

A sudden thought came to Yoshie.

"You don't mean..."

Keisu nodded.

"The moon. We must go to the moon."

"Well, that's a problem. These days, nothing but satellites are sent into space." Yoshie was surprised and she spread her arms. "I think we just have to give up."

"I heard in history class that there used to be a research city on the moon," said Keena.

She had always been good in her normal studies.

"It was abandoned after it produced no real results and it was forgotten once we developed our magic society. No one even thought about heading into outer space because it isn't compatible with our magic society," said Yoshie to double check what she knew about that research city.

"That is incorrect." Keisu shook her head. "Despite what your history classes may have taught you, the moon city was abandoned in order to seal Zero. He was also the control program for the moon city, so it cannot function without activating him. There was no option but to abandon the moon."

Yoshie was shocked to hear that. It made sense since Zero's creation had been related to the dawning of magic society, but this was much too different from what she had learned.

"I can't believe it... But wait. If we need to go to the moon to seal Zero, how was it possible to break that seal from earth?"

"Because Zero acted as the base of the gods' system as he slept, I was able to maintain a link to him even here on earth. I was modified to act as a safety valve. Because the workings of Zero's black box are unknown, they wanted to be able to regulate him via me."

"Then there must have been a research institution behind it. I worked in a temple, but I've never heard any rumors about that. It would have to be the black magicians or CIMO 8." Yoshie suddenly felt as if several events were pointing toward a single point. "All of the mysteries up until now are forming a strange sign. Why did space travel become taboo? Why did the empress herself allow the black magicians to survive? Why did the original demon king war happen?"

Yoshie seriously yet interestedly spoke her thoughts.

"Maybe we should think about this later," cut in Hiroshi. "Don't we need to figure out how to get to the moon?"

Yoshie turned to Keisu.

"Given what you said, there has to be an easy way to get to the moon."

Keisu nodded.

"Yes. There is a transfer circle leading there."

Hiroshi clapped his hands together.

"Oh, I get it. They left a way back in case they needed to reseal him. So where is it?"

"Below Constant Magic Academy."

"I see. The first war must have been fought over access to that circle," muttered Yoshie in admiration.

Keisu continued speaking without giving a direct response.

"But Zero knows where the transfer circle is, too. Now that he has further fused with the gods, he will have become a more accurate combat machine and he will try to destroy me. He can use every single system which is based on mana to destroy the demon king and me. That includes everything down to the traffic lights and air purifiers."

Keisu's statement was frightening.

"That doesn't sound good. I guess that means we shouldn't stay in the city too long. Zero can't detect your location, can he?" asked Yoshie.

Keisu nodded.

"That is correct. I predict he will use L'Isle-Adams to attack anyone who tries to approach the magic circle."

"This is getting closer to all-out war. Then again, he makes up all of

society now, so I guess we'd be the villains. And instead of all-out war, this is just us rebelling against society. The scale of the conflict is a bit big for that, though."

Yoshie gave a bitter smile.

"I feel bad about getting all of you involved in this," responded a sudden voice.

Akuto was descending from the sky while holding Junko.

"A-chan! Junko-chan!" cried Keena as she ran over to them.

Hiroshi also looked up at Akuto, smiled, and began to run over to him, but he stopped as soon as he saw Akuto's face.

He of course still wanted to approach his friend.

However, he was reminded of the look he had seen on Akuto's face when he had shot down Akuto for his act earlier.

Hiroshi had intended to make it an act from the beginning. He had believed that was what Akuto wanted, but just before the plasma had burst to fry only Akuto's outer layer, Akuto had not been smiling. His expression had been one of quiet resolution.

—That was the look of someone who did not care if I killed him.

He had known Akuto had that side to him. He had seen that same expression the last time they had directly clashed. But last time it had come from a belief that being killed was better than committing suicide or from a belief that Hiroshi could not kill him. In other words, it had been a fearless and confident expression.

But the meaning was completely different this time.

—He planned to leave everything to me afterwards.

Akuto had tried to leave it to Hiroshi to settle things after his death. It sounded good if one said Akuto fully trusted Hiroshi, but it felt heavier than that to Hiroshi. Essentially, Akuto wanted him to decisively stand on the side of “justice”.

No matter what happened in this battle, Akuto planned to end it with his own destruction. But he could not allow justice to be destroyed or to lose. Even if it was weakened or powerless, justice had to continue fighting with pride. He would never see peace.

But for the moment, Hiroshi suppressed the discomfort in his heart and walked over to Akuto.

“Did you hear all that? I can’t believe we have to find a transfer circle leading to the moon.”

“I heard, but I will not ask the rest of you to fight alongside me,” said Akuto.

Hiroshi felt a prickling in his heart. Those words were not directed toward him. This proved Akuto recognized his power, but it still weighed heavily on him.

Even so, Hiroshi held his hand out toward Akuto for a handshake.

"Now that we know the truth, we can't just back out."

"Thanks."

Akuto accepted the handshake.

Hiroshi understood why the warmth and strength of that handshake added to the weight in his heart.

Akuto viewed him as an equal.

—He's overestimating me. I'm not that strong. I can't do anything without the suit.

Hiroshi changed the subject so as not to be distracted by his thoughts.

"If we're going to do this, shouldn't we take a look at the overall situation first? Can you pull up a screen showing the area around the school?"

"Sure."

Akuto nodded and opened a mana screen. It displayed Constant Magic Academy from the side.

Yoshie looked impressed.

"With Zero in control, it's hard for us to use magic, but you can do anything. But what's all this? It looks like they gathered as many of their forces as they could."

L'Isle-Adam soldiers covered the academy's grounds. Those grounds were large, but there were thousands of L'Isle-Adams and hundreds of combat vehicles.

"They couldn't deploy the army around the palace because of all the innocent people there, but it looks like the academy is different. Defending the magic circle is their main goal, so we should probably count ourselves lucky they didn't send out a battleship."

"But with this much firepower gathered, only aniki and I can fight," said Hiroshi.

"The two of us will have to take Keisu then," said Akuto with a nod.

Keena had remained silent for a while, but she finally spoke up.

"You can't do that, A-chan."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous."

Everyone was surprised to hear Keena state the obvious. As he stared blankly at her, Hiroshi was both confused and impressed.

—She can honestly say whatever she's thinking.

And that had a way of drawing out Akuto's honest side.

"Well, I know it's dangerous, but..."

"I know what you want to do, A-chan. And I feel like it's something you have to do, but still."

Keena looked up at Akuto with teary eyes.

"I know I can't keep escaping death like this, but I know I was born to bring this all to an end. I have no other choice."

Akuto had a peculiar look in his eyes as if he had lost interest in everything and resigned himself to his fate.

But Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"C'mon! If you say that again, I'll get mad!"

"I think you're already mad. And I understand why you are. You were put in danger too and you saw that tremendous explosion."

"That's not it!"

Keena was clearly angry now.

Hiroshi understood how she felt. In fact, he felt pathetic because Keena was saying what he had been unable to say himself.

—I hope nothing horrible happens.

Just as Hiroshi thought that, Akuto suddenly looked behind him.

"What is that!?"

An odd distortion in space had appeared on one corner of the rooftop. It resembled the visual sign of something being transferred via mana, but it was clearly different. The others did not seem to understand, but Hiroshi immediately recognized that distortion.

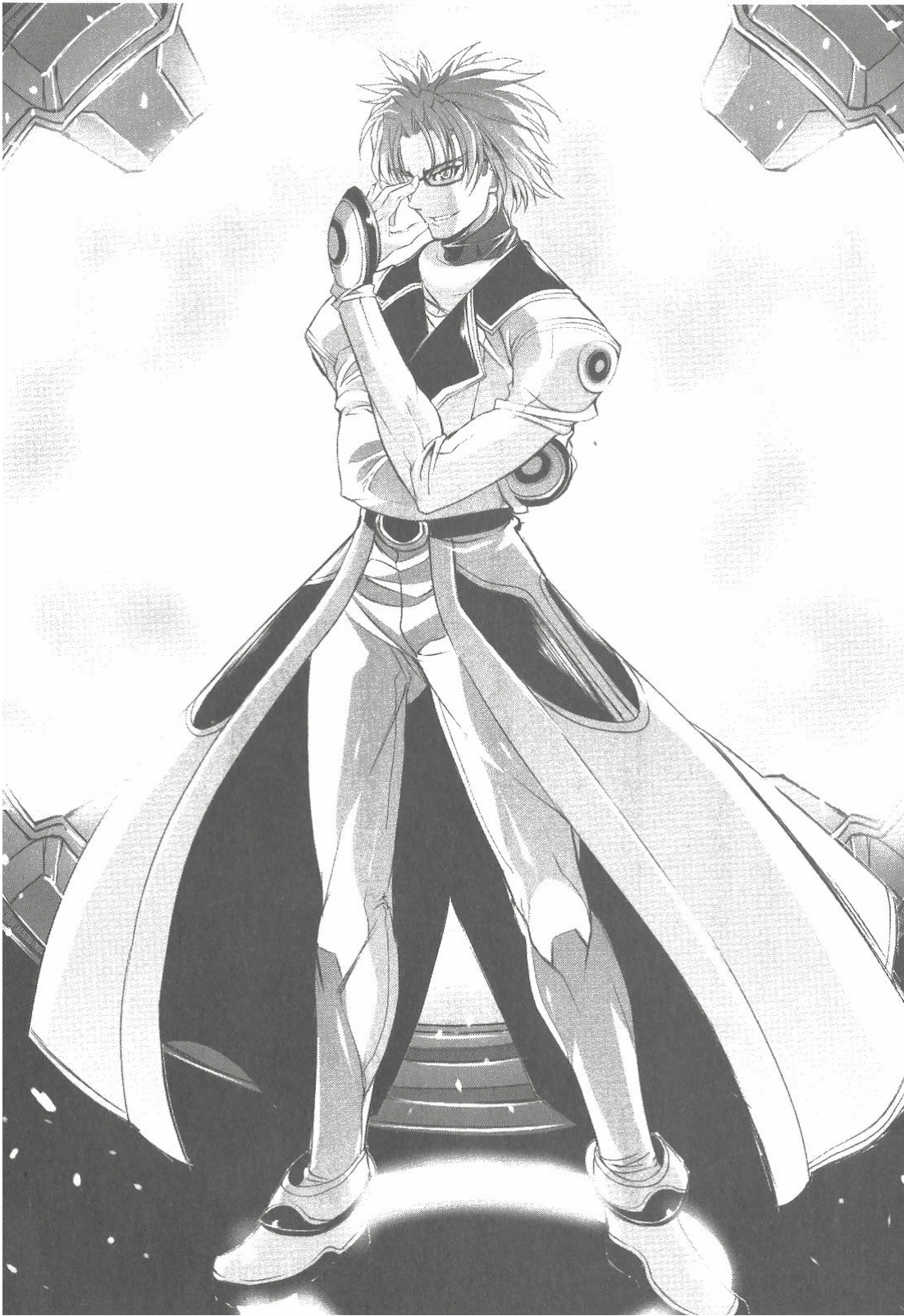
"That isn't mana."

His eyes widened in surprise. This was identical to the distortions in space when he called in his suit.

He had only ever seen one person use those distortions other than the Brave suit.

"Yamato... Bouichirou..." muttered Akuto.

That man had once tried to use Keena in a strange ritual sacrifice to the gods. He had claimed to come from the future where he had seen mankind's destruction.



The man who had just arrived via a transfer using technology impossible to recreate with modern science was slender and wore a lab coat. He did not seem full of himself, but he was indeed good looking. He adjusted the position of his glasses and began speaking with no introduction.

"I have a plan and I will have you carry it out."

Hiroshi took a defensive stance toward this strange man.

—This man uses the same powers as Yamato Bouichirou.

"What do you mean a plan? Who are you?" called Hiroshi while hiding the tension in his voice.

The man shook his head as if to say "oops".

"Oh, that's right. I have a bad habit of stating my business before introducing myself. My name is Kurahashi Kento. I am a member of CIMO 8, but I believe I can earn a certain sort of trust from you."

This man named Kento was the last CIMO 8 member to speak with 2V.

"CIMO 8? That was Yamato Bouichirou's organization," muttered Hiroshi.

However, none of the other members had used the same power as the Brave suit. It was possible this man knew more than the others.

"Wait," said Yoshie suddenly. "Are you Codename USD?"

Kento nodded.

"That is what I am called within CIMO 8."

"Kita-san, do you know him?" asked Junko.

"He graduated from Constant Magic Academy with the highest grades in the school's history," said Yoshie in an oddly excited tone. "He won the Alpha Award which is the highest honor one can achieve in magical research and he is well-respected in other fields ranging from mathematics to art. In short, he's a genius. At some point he half-retired from his job as priest and the rumor among the priests was that he became a member of CIMO 8. Other than Yamato Bouichirou, the group's leader, he's the only member of CIMO 8 whose real name is known. Basically, he was too skilled for his name to remain hidden. From what I had heard, his codename is USD. He's known as history's strongest."

That profile was exactly the sort of thing Yoshie would love.

Kento adjusted his glasses as if to say this was a troublesome group he had gotten involved with, but he did not correct anything she said.

"That transfer didn't use magic. If anyone uses magic, I can detect it," said Akuto. "But if you learned that from Yamato Bouichirou, it makes sense."

Kento nodded.

"Yes. This is the 'certain sort of trust' I mentioned."

That comment meant the most to Hiroshi.

Yamato Bouichirou had been the one to give him the Brave suit.

"Trust? But all we know is your identity. Which side are you on? Are you our enemy or our ally?" strongly asked Hiroshi.

"I would say I am on neither side. At least, I am not on the empress's side or on your side. However, I must cooperate with you for the time being. I want you to seal Zero," kindly explained Kento.

"What are you after?" asked Hiroshi because he could not figure it out.

"I cannot say at the moment. But you..."

Kento pointed at Hiroshi.

Hiroshi gave a start.

"What?"

"You have no choice but to do what I say. You are using the suit we gave you."

Kento's words seemed to stab into Hiroshi's heart.

"What...?"

Akuto then cut in.

" 'We'? Do you mean Yamato Bouichirou is with you?"

Kento shook his head.

"I do not know where he is. I assume he is dead, but I have no real confirmation."

"Then have you inherited his technology?" asked Akuto.

"Completely," said Kento with a nod. "It is still being argued whether history can be altered or not, but I am sure to go down in history as the inventor of this technology." Kento turned a slight smile toward Hiroshi. "Simply put, I am lending that suit to you. It is set so only you can use it, but I can freely take it from you."

Hiroshi was unable to hide how much this bothered him.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Kento's smile grew.

"You can view it that way if you wish, but I am merely making a request. I have nothing to offer you in return, but if you aren't going to fight, why do you need the suit? Or do you plan to become a vigilante?"

Kento was not trying to provoke Hiroshi. His was completely serious. And that made his words hit Hiroshi all the harder.

He knew he was only borrowing the power of the suit, but he felt it all the more when the person who gave him that power stood before him. In fact, he felt it was possible he would become a slave to that person.

But he also knew he could not choose to give up the suit. He needed to fight alongside Akuto.

"I will fight only when I believe I should fight. That is all I will say," stated Hiroshi in a pained voice.

Kento laughed.

"Yes. That is what you call a vigilante."

Hiroshi could say nothing in response.

Akuto must not have liked Kento's attitude because he spoke in a low voice.

"Then why won't you help us directly?"

"I am an onlooker," replied Kento. "That is what I must be."

"Can you really remain an onlooker in this situation?" asked Akuto half in disbelief.

Kento nodded.

"If you look at this incident from a higher level, there is nothing I can do but watch on."

"From a higher level? Enough nonsense. Just tell us what you know."

Akuto did not even bother trying to hide his displeasure.

"Fine."

Kento began explaining his surprising plan. Hiroshi would play the central role.

Hiroshi listened while groaning internally.

Meanwhile, Etou Fujiko was elsewhere.

She was in a park on the outskirts of the city. She could see others who had been transferred there. They were clearly shocked by the miracle that had occurred and they spoke with each other.

Fujiko spoke to a nearby middle-aged woman. Fujiko looked like a nice person on the outside, so it was not hard to get the woman to speak. She learned the woman fully believed the empress had caused the miracle.

—I see. How foolish of her.

Fujiko kept her surprise to herself and pretended to agree with the woman. She praised the empress, cursed the demon king for causing the Mana Burst, spoke a word of parting, and left.

She of course did not mean the curses, but she decided cursing Akuto might be a good idea after all once she walked through the park a bit and realized she was the only one of their group who had been sent there.

"Ahh... Honestly, Akuto-sama. Why must you treat me this way just because I ran off on my own?"

As she complained, she suddenly spotted someone she recognized out of the corner of her eye.

Her mouth opened in surprise and she muttered under her breath.

"Oh, my! What a coincidence! No, this might have been Akuto-sama's intention. How clever of him!"

It did not seem like a coincidence. Akuto had to have transferred her near this person. Fujiko took back the curses yet again and began pursuing this person from a distance.

The person seemed to be worried about drawing attention to himself. He was walking from empty area to empty area and he was currently headed deeper into the park where the trees grew thick. These were the

distinctive actions of someone up to no good.

“Oh, my. How convenient.”

Fujiko laughed quietly. She followed the man while making sure he did not spot her when he occasionally checked behind him.

The distinctive man with messy hair was Suzuki Issei.

He was the leader of the black magicians, but that position had been given to him by the empress in secret. His duty was to keep their secrets and hide the true form of the black magicians.

For an ardent black magician like Fujiko, that was more than enough reason to hold a grudge against him. He had deceived everyone for a long, long time and he had stood in the way of progress for the black magicians.

—I will make the most of the opportunity Akuto-sama gave me.

Fujiko quietly laughed again. Once she saw Issei lean up against a tree and sit down in a deserted area, she slowly snuck up behind that tree and wrapped her whip around his neck from behind.

She carried out the action without making any noise and did not give Issei enough time to shout out. He jumped in shock and then brought his hands to his throat when he had difficulty breathing.

"Is it a coincidence I found you here?" Fujiko tightened the whip from behind the tree and peered at his head from behind. "Or was this planned? Either way, I do not want you doing anything suspicious. Or rather, if you are going to do something suspicious, you need the guts to boldly do so in front of everyone."

Her voice seemed to clue Issei in to who was strangling him.

"S-stop... I saw what Kazuko did... I didn't realize she was that crazy... Please forgive me..."

Issei did his best to speak, but Fujiko spoke in a truly cruel tone of voice.

"Forgive you? I would say what you did deserves my hatred, not my forgiveness."

"I-I know that... I will tell you what secrets I know... So let's work together..."

"Work together?"

Fujiko tightened her grip on the whip.

"C-cough... Okay... We won't work together... I'll obey you..."

"You do not seem to understand my personality very well, but I suppose someone who only just met me might need some help. I am greedy," she said teasingly while beginning to regulate the strength of the whip.

"O-okay. I'll give you the rights to the inheritance of black magic... Surely that's enough..."

Fujiko grinned at that condition.

"That will do. But I am not letting my guard down. I will let you live, but we can talk here and now."

Fujiko loosened her grip a bit, but she was skilled enough to not quite let him breathe easily.

"Who would have thought my experience killing in the virtual alternate dimension would come in handy here?" she said dangerously.

"Kh... Cough... Here, I'll give you the password to transfer to the secret room from that store. I simply memorized the keyword, so I'll write it in my memo pad."

Issei reached into his pocket with a trembling hand, pulled out a standard mana memo pad, and wrote something in it. He hid the page with his hands, so Fujiko could not see what he was writing.

"I wrote it...in here..."

Issei then threw the memo pad into the distance. Fujiko would have to let go of the whip to reach it.

She understood why he had done that.

"You think you are quite clever, don't you?"

"Heh heh," laughed Issei weakly but with a hint of relief. "I'm glad you're so greedy. I don't care about my job as a grave keeper, but I need to stay alive if I'm going to keep eating more bowls of ramen. I think I wrote the real password, but it's possible I made a mistake."

"Hmph. I suppose you have managed to keep your life for now."

Fujiko loosened the whip, jumped away from him with the tree between them, and circled around the tree from a distance.

However, he had already run off.

She saw his receding back, knew she could not catch up, and walked over to pick up the memo pad.

It contained a string of characters. It contained too little regularity for something he made up on the spot, so she assumed it was real. She would not know for sure until she tried it, though.

"I do not want him to think he tricked me. I must revive true black magic, but something must be done about Kazuko and Zero before that can happen."

Fujiko checked through the memo pad. It did not seem to have any

other important information, but it did have Issei's contact information. She could directly contact him telepathically and she could use that to determine his location.

—He was probably lying when he said he would help me defeat Kazuko, but he might actually have information on her.

Fujiko had no intention of defeating Kazuko if it meant putting herself in danger, but she wanted to help Akuto if she could.

"Perhaps I can sell this information to the student council president. She must be desperate to get back at Kazuko, so she might end up torturing Issei. This could be interesting to watch."

Fujiko was satisfied with how evil the idea was. She memorized the password and erased it from the memo pad. If it was real, she would be able to revive true black magic.

Chapter 3: Even if I Say Goodbye

By nightfall, Akuto's group had moved to an abandoned building outside the city. It had originally been a factory, but it was now a dreary space with a roof covering the bare ground.

Yoshie had remembered it as a place they could hide, so Akuto had transferred them all there. Zero was monitoring the flow of mana over the entire empire, so only three people could escape his notice: Akuto who wielded the same power, Brave who had a mana canceller, and Keisu.

Akuto was currently spreading out a camping set he had brought from somewhere and everyone was sitting around the light of a lamp as they pleased. This hideout would likely keep them safe for the time being. Hiroshi had been checking his map, but now he asked Akuto's permission to head outside and take a look around. After that, they all received a rare time of rest.

"I love abandoned buildings. I always want to take photos. There's so much romance in forgotten places. You can imagine a cornered soldier died here or something."

Yoshie alone was excited, but she was also the only one working while she spoke on and on. She was creating the equipment they would need for their plan.

"It's been a while since I constructed something, but it really brings out my craft-loving side. I just wish this job wasn't so easy."

She was currently fixing a rundown land vehicle. They had brought in

an abandoned vehicle and she was making sure it would run.

"Are you good at all kinds of construction?" asked Akuto with an impressed tone.

"When I create my programs, I also want to make the mana devices to run them on. And when I create devices, I want to create the programs to run on them," answered Yoshie proudly.

Akuto could feel his heart calming down as he watched her. This was the first time he had spoken to her in a relaxed situation, but her oddly frank way of speaking allowed him to relax and simply be himself.

"How complex of things can you make?"

"I can go pretty far. For example, I can build autonomously thinking devices similar to L'Isle-Adams and the terminals of the gods. I can't create an actual consciousness like Zero, though."

This caught Akuto's interest.

"A human consciousness and a L'Isle-Adam's consciousness are different, right?"

"That's right. One has a sense of self and the other doesn't. It's kind of hard to explain. Even if you make a machine that can replicate itself, it won't have a sense of self. If an AI maintains a relationship with a person for long enough, they gain something resembling a sense of self, but it's still different from the sense of self humans have from the beginning. You

could say this is one of the big mysteries of life."

"A mystery of life?" muttered Akuto.

"Yeah. What creates life? If we knew that, we might also learn the secret of the universe's origin. At the very least, I bet it's related to the end of the world that Yamato Bouichirou mentioned."

"I have a feeling someone closer by knows that secret but isn't aware of it."

Akuto glanced over at Keena's face as she slept leaning up against him.

As she breathed gently, she looked like nothing more than a normal girl, but he had seen her carry out miracles a few times in the past. Yamato Bouichirou had also been obsessed with her, so it was possible Kento was after her as well.

"Kento wants to seal Zero rather than destroy him, right?" asked Akuto.

"Of course he does. Destroy Zero and the gods would cease to exist. You might want to destroy them, though," said Yoshie with a laugh.

"Yeah, I definitely want to destroy them."

For a while, Junko had seemed to want to say something and she finally made up her mind.

"Why do you insist on going that far?"

"Eh?" asked Akuto in confusion.

"I still do not understand why you would do that. In fact, I do not understand you as a person."

Junko's tone was very earnest, so Akuto grew serious as well.

"I don't understand myself either and that is what I want to see. I want to know who I am. Someone created me and gave me a role, so my identity was set for me. If I do not bring that to an end, I can truly never be myself."

Akuto's answer was sincere, but Junko fidgeted in irritation.

"That is not what I mean. I..."

But she trailed off. She tried to find the right words but found herself unable to continue.

In her place, Keena spoke up.

"A-chan, you need to think about us too."

She had woken and was looking up at his face while still leaning up against him.

"I need to think about you?" he asked.

"That's right." She nodded. "Junko-chan is asking this because she likes you."

"Wha-... What are you...?"

Junko blushed and began shaking her hands in denial, but Akuto only nodded earnestly.

"And I like all of you. So..."

"Not like that. You're as important to us as rice is to a farmer!" forcefully declared Keena.

"What kind of analogy is that?"

"Eh? No analogy could make it clearer! Farmers treat their rice with care. Just because the rice will be sold and eaten in the end doesn't mean they forget about it or give up on it! And if the rice could speak, the farmers wouldn't want to talk about harvest time. They'd want to hear how much the rice loves them."

Keena continued on and on.

Despite Akuto's confused look, she seemed to be satisfied with the point she had made because she curled up and went back to sleep.

"Th-that girl says some strange things," said Junko with a bitter smile.

She was still blushing, but she seemed to think Akuto had not caught on.

Meanwhile, Akuto gave a contemplative look and finally spoke to Junko.

"Is it wrong of me to think about your happiness in the future even if I'm going to sacrifice myself?"

Junko was caught off guard by the sudden question, but she nodded as soon as she grasped what he had meant.

"Yes, it is. Of course it is. Just think about it. You are doing all this because you do not want horrible things to happen to others. Well, we are the same. Just as you do not want anything painful to happen to the people you...um...care for, we do not want anything painful to happen to..." Junko trailed off shook her head and added, "Forget it."

But Akuto must have understood because he stared straight at her.

"I will try not to forget there are people willing to rescue me. Even if I was created as a tool meant to fight and ultimately die, I want to respond to your feelings up until the final moment."

"Wait, you idiot. Why are you getting so serious?"

Junko smiled to hide her embarrassment, but Akuto remained serious.

"Do not worry. I will bring everything to an end the day after tomorrow. Everything will go well."

"S-sure..."

Junko looked Akuto in the eye and gulped.

She then slowly reached her hand out toward his hand.

"Right. You want to bring it to an end."

Yoshie had appeared behind Akuto at some point and she suddenly embraced both him and Junko from behind.

"Hyah!"

"Ah..."

Junko and Akuto cried out.

"Sorry to interrupt you at such a nice moment, but I'll be upset if you don't let me join in," said Yoshie jokingly.

She rubbed her cheek up against Junko's cheek and tugged on Akuto's ear.

"When you're done, how about you pay this unsociable girl some attention? Or should the three of us do it together?"

"I-idiot... What are you saying...?"

Even Junko's ears turned red, but Yoshie ignored her and suddenly switched to a serious tone as she spoke to Akuto.

"Are you really planning to defeat Zero instead of sealing him? If so, you need to prepare yourself for that now."

"Yes." Akuto nodded. "I know what you're trying to say."

Akuto and Yoshie seemed to come to an understanding simply by exchanging a glance.

"And you're still going to do this? Are you sure that previous conversation isn't going to make your resolve waver?"

Akuto hesitated when he was asked again.

"You're right. I probably will hesitate. My thoughts are beginning to change a little."

Yoshie nodded and smiled.

"Then maybe I should put some effort into saving you as well."

"Wait. What are you two talking about?" asked Junko.

Yoshie returned to her teasing voice.

"Heh heh heh. Akuto-kun and I can understand each other pretty well without saying a word. Jealous?"

"Wh-why would I be jealous?"

Junko blushed yet again and waved her hands around.

"Ah ha ha. I'm just kidding. But it's because I'm so much like Akuto-kun that I like you so much."

Yoshie suddenly pushed Junko to the ground and climbed on top of her.

"Hyah! Stop!"

"Ohh, this sensation has a completely different charm to it than Fujiko-kun's."

Yoshie began groping various parts of Junko's body.

"S-stop that... Do not touch me there..."

"Touch you where? You'll have to tell me. And remember: Akuto-kun's listening."

"Wah! You idiot! You know what I mean, so just stop it!"

"Then should I say it?"

"Stop!"

"Tell me when you're done," said Akuto as he averted his gaze.

"You idiot! Stop her!" protested Junko.

Morning arrived.

This was the day on which Akuto intended to reach the transfer circle to the moon.

"If it gets dangerous, please get out of here," instructed Akuto.

He was speaking to the others aboard the land vehicle. That was Yoshie, Junko, Keena, and Keisu. Yoshie was the one driving the vehicle.

"I intend to, but I'm hoping we will all play a useful role here. Looking at that up there is enough to make me want to run away right now, though."

Yoshie felt a sudden chill.

The vehicle was on its way to Constant Magic Academy and L'Isle-Adams were waiting for them in formation. Having only four people charging toward an entire army felt like running out into sub-zero temperatures while naked.

"That formation is meant to be used against magic. They thin out the mana along their enemy's expected route and fire real bullets accelerated with mana from the side. Normally, you wouldn't drive a vehicle up to an army waiting with a trench built," said Yoshie while analyzing the situation with her goggles.

The western side of the academy contained a vast area of land made up of hills both small and large. It was perfect for a battlefield.

"They have a virtual alternate dimension field in place. As expected, they're keeping Brave from acting here. We were right not to bring him."

"But our strategy is the same as we discussed. Instead of breaking through, I'll knock all the L'Isle-Adams out of commission," said Akuto casually.

"Wow. How reliable," joked Yoshie to hide her fear.

Yoshie's lighthearted personality and curiosity allowed her to manage in dangerous places, but she was acting different this time because she had no experience in actual combat.

And Akuto seemed to sense her unease. He placed a hand on her shoulder and nodded toward Junko.

"Just leave it to Junko."

Junko was not used to being referred to by her given name, so she let out a short cry of surprise. However, she quickly recovered and nodded.

"Do not worry. In a fight on this level, I can protect the vehicle."

Akuto smiled and nodded.

"Good. I trust you. I'll regulate the mana density along our path. Normally, I want the rest of you to only move once everything is safe. Even so, I'm sure Zero will target Keisu, so I want you to move the vehicle around as bait."

"Understood."

Yoshie smiled bitterly as if her fear had vanished.

"Okay. Let's get going."

Akuto waved a hand and ran forward so casually one would never think he was on his way to a battlefield.

Even so, the area ahead of them filled with violence the instant he began moving. They could hear explosions and see flashes of light and flames from well ahead of the land vehicle. They of course came from attacks being sent toward Akuto.

"I know he can handle attacks like that, but I am still worried," muttered Junko.

"Oh, such love. But try worrying about us right now! Toh!"

The vehicle jerked forward as Yoshie accelerated.

It was true they had no reason to worry about Akuto. Even though all the attacks were focused on him, he easily defended against them all. He even had the leeway to attack the L'Isle-Adam soldiers beginning to target the vehicle.

Even so, some soldiers slipped through. Yoshie could see them approaching from the distant group fighting with Akuto. Zero supposedly had no way of detecting Keisu, but the L'Isle-Adams had likely seen her. And even if they had not, it was only natural to attack the approaching vehicle.

Three groups of five L'Isle-Adams in military uniforms flew toward them. Akuto finally noticed the threat and fired mana spheres at them and managed to instantly blow away two of the groups, but the remaining five soldiers created a formation blocking the vehicle's path forward. The well-trained soldiers quickly aimed their rifles with efficient motions.

"Toh!"

Yoshie began turning the steering wheel, but Junko stopped her.

"Exposing our flank is more dangerous. Keep straight. The mana is dense enough for me to defend against this!"

Junko jumped up from her seat and landed in front of the advancing vehicle. She ran faster than the vehicle, lowered her hips, drew her sword, and created four copies of herself.

The five version of herself each charged toward one of the L'Isle-Adams.

They caught on to what she was doing, so they fired.

"Those guns are nothing!"

All five Junkos created mana barriers. Due to the scattered mana density, a few bullets pierced the barrier, but she rotated her sword quickly enough to cut through the bullets. The copies did the same and their mana-made swords sliced through the bullets just as easily.

"Hah!"

Junko sliced through the L'Isle-Adam and its gun with a single slice.

The copies did the exact same, so the five L'Isle-Adams were defeated

simultaneously.

The land vehicle came to a stop next to her a moment later.

"Not bad," said Yoshie in admiration.

"More are coming," said Junko without growing embarrassed.

Just as she had said, more L'Isle-Adams that Akuto had missed were headed their way. This was not due to Akuto doing a poor job. The L'Isle-Adams – and therefore Zero – had made Keisu their main target. An overwhelming number of soldiers were targeting the vehicle.

"Drive around to avoid them as best as you can. Let's go."

Junko then created many more copies of herself. They surrounded the vehicle and defended against the coming enemies so that not even a single kitten could get through.

The wave of L'Isle-Adams struck the wall of Junkos and intense mana light surged out.

"Ee!"

Yoshie instinctually lowered her head, but not even a single bullet struck the vehicle.

The Junkos wielded their swords like fierce gods and sliced through, crushed, or repelled the L'Isle-Adams attacking with all sorts of weapons.

"Ohhhhhhhhh!" roared Junko.

It was commonly known that the effects of mana changed depending on one's imagination. Just as in Akuto and Zero's fight, a human will was the key to defeating L'Isle-Adams in a magic battle. This made Junko's honed mind overwhelming.

"Let's go!"

As Junko and her copies stopped the waves of L'Isle-Adams, she began to advance.

Junko and her copies moved in such harmony it was impossible to tell which was the original. They moved like a herd of wild bulls. The L'Isle-Adams outnumbered the Junkos, but their army began to crumble.

Once the L'Isle-Adams began to fall back, Junko pursued them.

Some of the retreating soldiers managed to recover well, but they only found the brutal destruction of Akuto's attacks awaiting them.

Every single L'Isle-Adam that entered his field of vision was diligently crushed. The ones nearby exploded from within after a single glare. The ones more distant had a mana sphere thrown through their gut with a single motion of a fingertip.

The L'Isle-Adams were under Zero's control, so the entire group was able to act like a living being, but Akuto was methodically crushing each individual cell. They could not maintain their ability to fight. If they had had a sense of self, the fear would likely have left them standing still like empty, soulless shells.

"I'm glad they're on our side."

Yoshie watched Junko and Akuto fight like it was a show.

"But they do look somehow beautiful like this," she muttered.

As Akuto remained motionless in the air while heartlessly and overwhelmingly crushing his enemies whether they were nearby or far away, he had the majesty one would expect of a demon king.

As Junko wielded her white sword so it danced like icy snow and cut open a path alongside her identical copies, she looked like the kind of fierce and beautiful swordsman who would accompany a demon king.

"Won't this be over before long?" asked Keena from the backseat where she was protecting Keisu.

"Looks that way," agreed Yoshie.

Barely any of the L'Isle-Adams were functioning anymore. Constant Magic Academy's grounds were covered in corpses.

"I feel sorry for them," muttered Keena.

"Yeah, I do feel sorry for those L'Isle-Adams," replied Yoshie. "He's managed to grow this heartless, but the worst part is yet to come."

"The worst part?" asked Keena in puzzlement.

"That's right. They've finished up outside, so now we have to enter the school building."

Yoshie pointed forward.

Akuto and Junko stood next to each other atop a pile of destroyed L'Isle-Adams. It was a desolate yet oddly reassuring sight.

Akuto and the others cautiously entered the school building.

When they peered inside, the halls were not filled with waiting L'Isle-Adams and nothing happened even when Akuto entered ahead of the others. No traps were waiting for them.

"What is going on?" asked Junko.

She was keeping an eye on their surroundings from the tail end of the group while they made their way to the stairs leading underground.

"Focusing your forces is standard. It's possible they didn't expect the army outside to actually win," answered Yoshie ahead of Junko.

She had input the route Keisu had mentioned into her goggles and now overlaid it on her surroundings.

"Okay, it's this way. Through this wall."

Yoshie pointed at a stone wall in an underground passageway that Akuto and the others from the school were familiar with.

"We've used this passageway before, but there was never anything-..."

Akuto trailed off as Yoshie checked her goggles again and placed a hand on one part the wall. With a low-pitched noise, the wall slid aside, revealing another passageway.

"I never knew this was here."

Surprised, Akuto checked within the passageway. There was no one inside, but the disturbance to the thick dust made it clear someone had passed through recently.

They continued through that passageway while protecting Keisu. They reached a staircase which brought them down several more floors.

When they arrived at the bottom, they saw a light at the end of the

passageway.

Akuto stopped at the head of the group.

"Is that...?" asked Yoshie as she looked ahead. She then let out a groan. "I knew it... I had hoped I was wrong, but it looks like this really was their trump card."

"Y-you mention this trump card yesterday too, but what is it?"

Junko sounded confused as she peered forward from behind Keena and Keisu.

And then she gasped.

The silhouette of a slender girl was visible up ahead.

As they continued down the passageway, they found a room the size of a football field and a several meter wide transfer circle glowed in the center. The circle was the sole light source and the girl stood in front of it.

"I cannot let you go any further. I will kill you all here," she said in a cold voice.

Junko knew the voice well.

"Korone..."

As Junko continued forward, Korone's form came into view.

She realized this was what Akuto and Yoshie had been talking about. It was true Akuto would be unable to defeat her.

Korone wore her usual school uniform and the lack of expression in her eyes was the same as always, but her actions were completely different. As she raised her hand, the motion contained both Kazuko's grace and the mannerisms of Zero when he used a humanoid body.

"She's being controlled," muttered Junko.

"Most likely. But it's hard to say how direct the control is," said Yoshie cautiously.

"Korone!" called Akuto.

"That is this unit's name," replied Korone. "But at the moment..."

Korone raised her hand and the flow of mana around her distorted.

With the sound of the air ripping apart, a large transfer circle appeared over her head.

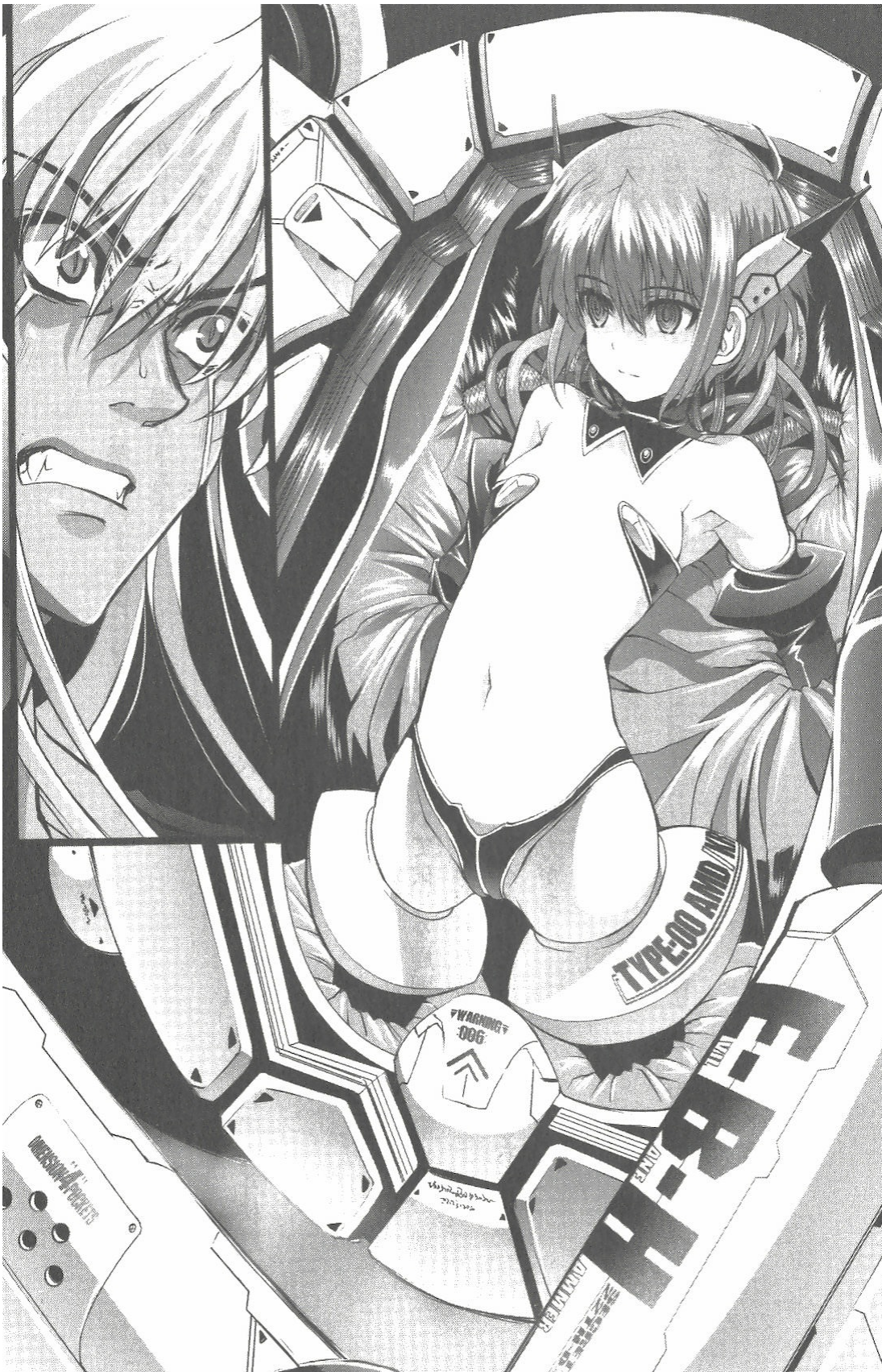
"A weapon?" muttered Akuto.

A large machine appeared from the circle. It looked halfway between a machine tool and an airplane and it seemed able to fly on its own.

Once it was fully transferred in, it slowly descended above Korone. Surprisingly, it began transforming. The center of the machine tool-like device split apart and a few of the pieces attached to different parts of Korone's body.

Once the transformation and combination completed, it looked like Korone was wearing some sort of armor. Alternatively, it looked like a giant twice the size of a normal human was holding a normal sized human in its belly.

Korone waved her hand to test the armor's movement. The double-sized hand let out a roar as it moved with great power. The hand pointed at Akuto.



"I have equipped the Evil Bane Hammer, the artifact of the god Markt. You may call me Armored Korone."

"That strange joke sounds like Korone..." commented Junko.

"But she still has the mannerisms of Kazuko and Zero. She's being controlled, so this isn't really Korone. The different identities seem to be mixed together to a certain extent," added Akuto.

"So that's the Evil Bane Hammer. That powerful armor is kept by the Temple of Markt," explained Yoshie.

"So is it like my Sword of Sohaya?" asked Junko.

Each of the temples had a single weapon looked after by the priests. The devices created a stronger link to the god, so they were the most powerful weapons an individual could use. But during the recent peace, they had only been used as symbols.

"It is known as a hammer because it gives the wearer the hardness of steel and a powerful hammer with which to strike those who break the law. This weapon has been used in previous wars," explained Yoshie as she pointed at Korone's right arm.

A giant metal stake was attached to the forearm. The hammer was bent and it was large enough to overbalance the entire armor if held out straight. Its mere presence seemed to radiate pressure.

"That giant hammer has a booster attached to the back. It's about as simple a weapon as you can get, but it's incredibly destructive."

For that comment alone, Yoshie did not use her standard rhetoric.

"Here I come," announced Korone as she suddenly advanced and swung

the hammer horizontally toward Akuto.

"Ah!"

Akuto jumped backwards to avoid it, but the hammer had tremendous mass. It compressed the air where he had been and caused that air to burst as it passed through.

A shockwave spread as if the air itself had exploded.

"That is not all."

Korone used the momentum of her missed strike to rotate all the way around and swing the hammer diagonally up at a slightly different angle.

"Fire," she muttered, igniting the booster on the back of the hammer.

With a great roar, the hammer shot toward Akuto.

"!"

He jumped to avoid it once more.

With a sound resembling an earthquake, the hammer smashed the stone floor and sent fragments flying everywhere. Only after gouging out a large portion of the ground exposed below did the hammer stop.

As Yoshie watched that ridiculous power through her goggles, she let out a surprised cry.

"That attack is too powerful to withstand using a barrier of compressed mana!"

Akuto gulped.

"You can't defend against it with mana?"

But she had to move the hammer a lot. To send two strikes in a row, she spun like a top.

"Still, it isn't hard to avoid," he muttered.

"And if you can easily avoid it, you can easily touch it afterwards," analyzed Yoshie.

Just as she had said, Akuto evaded the hammer, charged right up to Korone, directly touched the armor's right arm, and focused mana to destroy the arm.

"Hah!"

He could tell he had properly controlled the mana, but he jumped back with a look of surprise.

"I can't destroy it!"

Yoshie also looked surprised.

"The armor is too strong to destroy with mana!?"

"Exactly. As long as I continue swinging this hammer, you can never stop me," said Korone.

The voice was definitely Korone's, but the tone made it clear this was actually Kazuko speaking.

"No, there's a weakness. But..." said Yoshie.

Akuto understood what she meant. The armor did not cover Korone's entire body. It was of course still protecting her exposed parts, but Akuto had enough magic power to break through that level of protection as long as he could touch her.

Korone had to know this, but she still smiled. That was an expression one would never have seen on Korone's face. The unconcerned smile was the same one they had seen on Kazuko.

"The demon king cannot do that," declared Korone/Kazuko.

"Kh!"

Akuto avoided another attack.

"That is why Korone was brought here as our final trump card. You cannot destroy her. I will repay you for what you did earlier, even if it is not done directly."

Korone/Kazuko sneered.

"This is what I feared. Akuto-kun can't do this," said Yoshie.

She was exactly right. Akuto continued to avoid Korone's attacks. The attacks were not enough to wear down his mental strength and Korone was not fighting fiercely enough to run out of energy. The battle would likely continue indefinitely if nothing was done.

"Then will this continue forever?" asked Keena suddenly.

As if she had heard, Korone/Kazuko grinned and gave an unexpected answer.

"If I only target the demon king, it will. But what if someone else is on the receiving end of this strike that not even the demon king can defend against!"

Korone/Kazuko changed the trajectory of her hammer and it flew in a different direction. Instead of targeting Akuto as he moved around, it changed direction by 90 degrees. It now travelled toward Keena, Junko, and Keisu who the first two were protecting.

"So that's what you're after!" shouted Yoshie in surprise.

This of course left Korone wide-open to Akuto. He could stop the attack by attacking her, but...

"What will you do? If you do not defeat Korone, Keisu will be hit. And to protect her, Soga Keena and Hattori Junko must die," said Korone/Kazuko.

She used the hammer's momentum to swing it up and triumphantly forced Akuto to make his choice.

"Choose!"

Korone/Kazuko's cruel hammer strike flew toward Keena, Junko, and Keisu.

Akuto's face twisted and he let out a quiet voice.

"You coward..."

"Ho ho ho ho! Is there anything wrong with that?" laughed Korone/Kazuko.

With a roar, the hammer slammed down from above the three girls.

An explosive noise rang out and a great vibration spread through the

stone floor like a wave.

The hammer's movements were large enough that it was not difficult to avoid even for the others. And in fact, two of them had avoided it. Junko leaped away holding Keena.

But Keisu...

"I won! It is all over now!" announced Korone/Kazuko.

Keisu had been directly below the hammer. She had not avoided it. She could not even be seen crushed beneath it. The impact of the hammer had simply caused her parts to scatter in every direction. They audibly clattered across the floor.

"Now Zero cannot be resealed. Any further fighting on your part would be meaningless. Zero will never disappear."

Korone/Kazuko slowly raised the hammer. She gave a satisfied nod when she saw Keisu's remains below.

"If Zero will not disappear, he will rule the world if I am defeated. In other words, you cannot defeat me."

She announced her absolute victory.

She was certainly right. It was better to have Kazuko controlling Zero than to allow Zero to freely rule. All of Akuto's group's actions had been

for naught.

But hope remained in Akuto's eyes.

And Korone/Kazuko finally noticed this.

"Why are you not despairing? Don't tell me..."

Korone/Kazuko seemed to realize something and she started to have a conversation with herself. She was likely speaking with Zero, but both sides of the conversation were spoken with Korone's voice.

"Has anything changed?"

"What is this? Something is approaching me."

"Approaching you? I thought you were on the moon."

"I am. Something is approaching the moon."

Zero's comment was shocking to Kazuko.

"Impossible." Korone/Kazuko was confused. "No rockets that can reach the moon still exist."

"A shuttle is most definitely approaching the moon."

After that comment in Zero's tone, Korone/Kazuko turned toward Akuto.

"What did you do?"

"What you destroyed was a quickly-made doll. It could move, but it was hollow."

Akuto grinned.

The other day, Yoshie had created a doll that looked just like Keisu. It had no AI, so there was no fear of Zero noticing. And Zero would not find that odd because he could not detect the real Keisu either.

"Then where is the real one?"

Korone/Kazuko's voice was trembling.

"On a shuttle from a museum. Apparently, it still works," answered Akuto.

Kazuko must have known what shuttle he meant because she gave a confused rebuttal.

"But it had no rocket to launch it into orbit!"

"Someone worked hard to make up for that."

Akuto grinned again.

"So that's it. Brave!" muttered Korone/Kazuko with a shocked expression.

"It seems he could just barely carry it far enough from the effects the planet's gravity. And Zero can't detect him or Keisu. They left two nights ago. We calculated they could get enough speed to arrive in two days," explained Akuto.

"Damn you, demon king! Why don't you play fair!?" shouted Kazuko.

—The shuttle should be fine up into orbit. It was apparently made to travel between the moon and the orbital station. It can also reenter the atmosphere. It just doesn't have the ability to launch into orbit on its own.

Hiroshi recalled what Kento had told him.

This part of the story occurred two days before.

Hiroshi checked the location of the museum on his map and flew their while carrying the real Keisu and with his mana canceller active. He slipped past the human guards working there, entered through the roof, and looked up at the shuttle which was already an antique.

"You will be carrying this up into orbit?" asked Keisu in an impressed tone.

The lights were off in the museum's display hall. The room had the same layout as a giant warehouse and a shuttle the size of a passenger plane sat in the center, gathering dust. Ever since flight using mana had become common, ships with wings for gliding had become a rare sight in the empire.

"If I can get the shuttle up to the designated point on the space elevator, workers under CIMO 8's influence will supply us with fuel. They apparently have some fuel stored for satellite orbital correction rockets."

"The shuttle can travel to and from the moon from there, right? Then we need to go," said Keisu.

Kento had of course been the one to propose this plan. Hiroshi was worried about what the man was truly after, but he could think of no other plan.

"What is that Kento guy thinking?"

"Do not worry about that now. You need to focus on transporting me," said Keisu as she moved to the side of the shuttle.

Hiroshi picked her up, floated up a few meters to the shuttle's side hatch, and opened it manually. The airlock inside could also be operated manually, so it did not matter that the electronics did not seem to be functioning. The inside of the shuttle was pitch black, but Keisu

continued inside without issue.

"The safety and damage checks will be carried out at the space elevator's satellite dock, so don't touch anything for now."

After seeing Keisu nod, Hiroshi closed the hatch and moved toward the switch on the wall which would open the display area's door. The shuttle had been brought in through this door, so it covered an entire wall. However, it used mana to operate, so the guards would notice once he opened it. He would have to act quickly from that point on.

He pressed the switch, quickly flew back, and crawled beneath the shuttle's tire.

"Here goes."

He used his suit's gravitational control to bear the weight of the shuttle and lift it up.

He did not feel the weight, but he had to pay attention and prevent the shuttle from hitting the wall.

He began to fly while carrying the shuttle and carefully slid it out the door.

He then gathered momentum and flew up into the sky.

A lot of people had to have seen the shuttle flying through the night

sky, but only a few would have found it odd. Most would think it was a flying bus and those who correctly identified it would forget about the old shuttle by the next day.

The guards would of course realize the truth and they would report the theft. Kento had said he would prevent that report from rising too high, but they still had to supply it and repair it as soon as possible. Even if Kazuko realized they were planning to fly to the moon, no one could stop them once they were on their way.

Hiroshi finally arrived in orbit and brought the shuttle into the satellite maintenance dock.

The space elevator resembled a narrow rod and it extended down toward the earth. A large cylindrical facility was attached to the end. It was known as a space station and it generated electricity and managed the satellites in orbit.

Just as the shuttle began to enter the dock which looked like a hole torn from one end of the station, a large number of workers in protective suits came out, gathered around the shuttle, and began fueling and checking over the shuttle without speaking a word.

Hiroshi tried to speak with them, but he gave up when he realized he had no way of contacting them. More importantly, none of them tried to speak with him.

Several tedious hours passed. Hiroshi finally straightened his back again when he heard Keisu's voice.

“The instruments check is over. Everything is on line. The fueling is also complete. Please take the shuttle into orbit now.”

Keisu had contacted him using the radio while seated in the shuttle’s pilot seat. The shuttle’s lights were now on and she was visible through the window.

“The shuttle was created to function with oxygen-breathing humans onboard, so it is maintaining an environment suitable for humans,” continued Keisu.

Hiroshi turned back toward the satellite maintenance workers and found they were moving away from the shuttle. He watched them leave, but they did not give any sort of greeting.

—When I was acting on my own, everyone would wave to me.

He felt a bit lonely but came to a sudden realization.

—When did I start expecting favorable treatment? Aniki has always been treated like this.

Only a fraction of people were interested in the direction the world was headed and everyone else would simply do the work they were ordered to do. These people were not thinking about whether allowing the shuttle to launch was right or wrong. They did not care whose side it benefited. If Hiroshi had been in their position, he would likely have done the same, but carrying out one’s job like that was part of the “story” Akuto hated so much. Those people wanted to protect the story that said they were no

one special and had no power. And that was precisely what had turned Hiroshi into a hero and Akuto into a demon king.

—But if no one believes in the same great story, the world can't function and shuttles can't be launched.

Hiroshi grew melancholy as he wondered if he too had to work to protect that story. He thought about his position. He bore a great weight using borrowed power.

—What can I do with my own power?

He blankly thought on that, but then shook his head so he could focus on the job at hand.

He carried the shuttle from the maintenance dock and into black space.

Below, he could see the blue light reflected from the earth. Far ahead, he could see the pale light of the moon.

He pointed the shuttle toward that pale light.

He then circled around to the front of the shuttle and waved at Keisu in the pilot seat.

"Your turn."

"Leave it to me," answered Keisu.

The shuttle's engine ignited and it began to accelerate. It grew smaller and smaller in Hiroshi's vision. He could see far into space, but the shuttle still shrank into a point of light and vanished in only a few seconds.

"You're the one that doesn't play fair. Anyway, this reverses the situation. We just have to wait for Keisu to seal Zero," said Akuto.

"Kh. You think you're so clever!"

Kazuko used Korone's body to form an unpleasant expression, turn around, and head for the transfer circle. It was now Akuto's turn to stop her.

"You need to use that circle to reach the moon, but I can keep you away even if I can't hurt you!"

Akuto punched the stomach portion of Korone's armor and sent her flying backwards. After a few meters, she dug her feet into the ground and stopped, but her expression showed her panic.

Their roles as defender and invader had reversed.

"I know Kazuko wants to enter the transfer circle, but why is she so panicked?" asked Junko.

"Keisu said Zero can't stop her on the moon," answered Yoshie. "She was made to function there, after all."

"Yes, but if Kazuko knew that, wouldn't she have sent an army to the moon ahead of time? We carried out this feint because we were afraid she would do exactly that," continued Junko.

"Given the mana system, she couldn't have sent an army in ahead of time. On the moon, all energy comes from the solar batteries. An army uses too much energy to stay there for long."

"In that case, reinforcements will be arriving here to help Korone."

Junko turned toward the entrance and heard footsteps approaching down the corridor.

"You take care of them. If you can hold them off until Keisu seals Zero, we win," said Yoshie.

"Got it. I will push them back!" shouted Junko as she created copies of herself.

She let out a battle cry and charged into the corridor where she began fighting like a fierce god once more. Sounds of gunfire and clashing swords rang out, so it was obvious she was stopping the reinforcements.

Yoshie nodded as she listened to the sounds. The time they needed was as good as theirs. But then her expression grew uncertain and she turned toward Korone.

"But that means Kazuko will begin focusing on one thing," she muttered.

"What's that?" asked Keena.

"Defeating Akuto-kun at all costs."

Yoshie silently pointed at Korone.

She had repeatedly charged forward in an attempt to break past Akuto, but none of her charges or hammer attacks had worked. She was now standing there as if she had given up on it all.

"Are you sure she hasn't given up? Or maybe Zero was already sealed and she's returned to being Korone-chan," suggested Keena.

But...

"This might be bad," muttered Yoshie as she activated her chainsaw.

Korone/Kazuko raised her hammer above her head. She had done the same countless times already. She then ignited the hammer's rear booster and began the acceleration. She had used this intense attack countless times as well.

But her target was different this time.

"Not good!"

Akuto and Yoshie ran forward at the exact same moment.

Korone's Evil Bane Hammer was targeting Korone herself. The front of the armor covering her was open and the hammer was headed exactly there.

"No!" shouted Yoshie.

In the next instant, a heavy sound of impact rang out. Unlike the countless previous impacts, this one included a spine-chilling crushing sound.

"Gh!"

The one who coughed up blood was Akuto. He had covered Korone's body and caught the hammer with his back. No, he did not catch it. The hammer's special alloy was harder than the compressed mana which protected Akuto's body. Rather than catching it, Akuto had taken the blow for Korone.

"Akuto-kun!"

Yoshie slid in from the side and shoved him away. Korone's next strike had targeted him, so this knocked him out of the way of danger.

"I told you yesterday not to do anything like this," complained Yoshie as she fell to the ground along with him.

"I acted without thinking... But I'm prepared to make the sacrifice," replied Akuto in a pained voice.

"You aren't prepared if you do it without thinking. And if we're going to sacrifice someone... Sorry, but it should be her."

Yoshie stood up and faced Korone with chainsaw in hand. She could avoid the hammer strikes, but she could not knock Korone away like Akuto could.

"I can handle this. I'm already regenerating, so I won't die."

Akuto had collapsed to the ground, but he placed his hands on the ground, sat up, and groaned.

"Please believe me! Not even you can block the next strike. Don't do anything!" said Yoshie as if giving Akuto an order.

Korone/Kazuko grinned as she raised her right hand to attack herself once more. If Akuto took this next attack as well, his regeneration would not be enough.

"Stop!" shouted Yoshie.

She did not know how he had so much strength left, but Akuto moved

more quickly than anyone else and once more threw himself in front of Korone.

"My, how foolish."

Kazuko's mocking comment was spoken with Korone's mouth and voice.

"If you want to laugh, then laugh," said Akuto.

And then the hammer's booster ignited.

"No, Korone-chan! Wake up!"

More intense than the sound of the booster and louder than the sounds of Junko's battle was Keena's piercing voice filling the room.

As if the air had suddenly frozen, everyone there stopped moving.

And Korone was no exception.

"Ah..."

Other than Keena, Akuto was the only one who understood what had happened. As he watched Korone's expression, he distinctly saw the normal Korone there. Her face remained expressionless, but this was definitely Korone.

"This will not last long. Please move away from me. We will meet again in the next life," said Korone.

As one would expect of her, it was an odd thing to say, but Akuto sensed something from it.

"Korone!"

He reached out toward her, but she quickly removed her arm from the armor's right arm cover and shoved Akuto away.

"Korone!"

He flew limply backwards where Yoshie caught him in her arms.

"Let go of me. Korone has returned to normal!"

He struggled, but Yoshie shook her head.

"I can't. If she has returned to normal, this will only grow worse."

He quickly realized what she meant. A moment later, Korone's expression reverted to Kazuko's and she began speaking with Zero.

"Zero, why wasn't I able to control this L'Isle-Adam?"

"I do not know. And that means she could become an obstacle later,"

replied Zero with Korone's mouth.

"I see. Then I will destroy her," said Kazuko.

"Stop!" cried Akuto.

Korone/Kazuko grinned. Korone was once more fully controlled by Kazuko. With a nasty smile, she removed her own body from the Evil Bane Hammer.

Korone's body tumbled forward from its relatively high location.

"Korone!" shouted Akuto when he realized what Kazuko was trying to do.

However, Akuto could do no more than that because Yoshie held him back.

"Don't," said Yoshie. "Use this chance to enter the transfer circle. I will handle the rest."

She tried to drag him backwards, but he refused to move.

Once Korone was released from the Evil Bane Hammer, the armor instantly transformed back into its flight form and the hammer's booster ignited. It flew toward Korone's back as she fell.

In that instant as Korone seemed to hang in the air, she turned toward Akuto.

She had returned to her normal self.

"...!"

Akuto was left speechless.

He clearly saw her lips form the word "goodbye".

Immediately afterwards, the Evil Bane Hammer knocked her through the air and pieces of her body scattered in every direction.

"Korone!"

"Korone-chan!"

Akuto and Keena both cried out.

The sound of the booster seemed to mock their screams. The Evil Bane Hammer retained its momentum from destroying Korone and flew forward. It disappeared into the transfer circle.

When Yoshie saw the light produced by the transfer, she let go of Akuto and shouted out.

"After transferring, they'll try to destroy the circle! We need to hurry through!"

Junko responded from the corridor.

Her voice was almost a scream.

"She is right! They have brought out explosives! They are coming in for a suicide bombing attack! I am heading back your way! Hurry to the circle!"

Hearing that, Yoshie began pushing on Akuto's back.

Akuto's eyes lacked any strength, but then he nodded resolutely and headed toward Keena. The two of them held hands and moved toward the transfer circle. The mental shock must have slowed his regeneration because his gait was heavy.

After making sure Akuto was on his way, Yoshie approached Korone's scattered body, picked up the L'Isle-Adam's bag from the ground, and pulled a beam weapon from it. She used it to cover Junko's retreat.

Junko ran up to her while using her copies to hold the enemy back.

"The one's holding the explosives are almost here! We need to get in the circle!"

Yoshie nodded.

"Understood. Just wait a second."

She began returning the beam weapon to the bag.

"We don't have time for that even if we do need weapons!" shouted Junko.

"Don't worry. Go on ahead. Make sure Akuto-kun and Keena get in!" shouted Yoshie while having trouble with the bag.

"Hurry!" said Junko.

She used her legs which were strengthened by dense mana and the Sword of Sohaya to leap right next to the transfer circle in no time. She gave a push to Akuto and Keena's backs.

Once those two had entered the circle, she turned around.

Yoshie had activated her chainsaw, placed it against the ground, and was using the teeth digging into the floor in place of a wheel to ride toward the circle.

"Hurry!" shouted Junko.

She could not buy much more time with her copies and a group of L'Isle-Adams was pressing in at the entrance. A few of them were covered in an amount of explosives that would not normally be used

underground.

"If those explode, the entire room will collapse! Hurry!"

Junko waved toward Yoshie.

"Just a bit further!" shouted Yoshie.

However, some L'Isle-Adams had approached right behind her.

"Hurry!"

Junko waved vigorously.

"Gooooo!"

Yoshie charged inside the transfer circle just as the L'Isle-Adams behind her leaped toward the circle and blew themselves up.

Junko and Yoshie vanished inside the light of a transfer just as a tremendous explosion occurred.

Chapter 4: An Eternal Battle

"They went to the moon?" asked Lily in surprise.

After sending off the shuttle, Hiroshi had returned to the resistance hideout Lily had mentioned. Many priests and other resistance members were hiding in a warehouse rented from someone who sympathized with their cause.

"Yes," replied Hiroshi. "I just hope it goes well."

The warehouse manager's office contained a desk piled with cardboard boxes. Standing in front of it were Lily, Hiroshi, and Fujiko.

"With Akuto-sama helping, I want to say it will go well, but..."

Fujiko turned a dejected look toward Lily.

"I know what you mean," agreed Lily. "If Keisu should have arrived by now and nothing has changed, the odds are good the plan failed."

"Wait! Why do you say that? Even if Keisu can't seal Zero, the others can head to the moon via the transfer circle."

Hiroshi sounded a little angry, but Lily shook her head.

"The mana is sparse on the moon and there is no energy to power it.

Zero and Akuto were evenly matched here on Earth, so they will be evenly matched on the moon. But on the moon, they will both be evenly powerless."

"You mean..."

Hiroshi still did not seem to get it.

"I mean the odds are high he won't be able to do anything," said Lily in irritation.

"Then..."

"Akuto-sama will not die, but there is a good chance he will return after not accomplishing anything. When it comes to that, it will be an issue of whether we can defeat Kazuko or not. Speaking of which, do you think we can use that information?"

Fujiko turned toward Lily and Lily nodded.

"That information" was what Lily and the priests had gotten out of Issei, elder of the black magicians, after capturing him.

"It seems the information he gave us on Kazuko's likely hiding spots was true. We put him through some intense interrogation, after all. But it seems he does not actually know where she is at the moment. We are still searching for her."

"Her popularity with people who do not know her true self is her weapon. I doubt she can accomplish her goal without appearing somewhere. If she does not make an appearance after that explosion, it will lend credence to the theories that she is dead, so she should show up in public somewhere tomorrow. Even if we know the priests are hopeless, their endurance has to have a limit. We need to find her as quickly as possible."

Fujiko sounded disagreeable and it seemed to annoy Lily. Lily's mouth twisted to the side.

"Hah. They do say you think a lot like those with similar personalities. You've trained enough with those demonic beasts Akuto didn't want to use, right? Rather than have the priests dirty their hands eliminating the L'Isle-Adams, we can have those animals handle it."

"President, you must have really hated receiving a beating from Kazuko."

"At least I don't turn tail and run the instant I see a powerful enemy. What kind of person runs away and effectively betrays the forces of the guy she claims to love?"



Fujiko and Lily were clearly glaring at each other.

"S-stop this, you two."

When Hiroshi cut in between them, they glared at him instead.

"You go train for your superhero show with that disgraced idol! They found a weakness and now you can't fight, remember!?"

"Kazuko is more popular than you because you are such a pathetic person in your normal life!"

Hiroshi shrank down as the two girls shouted at him.

"You... You don't have to go that far..."

Suddenly, a priest burst into the room.

"Here it is! It's Kazuko! She's going to give a speech at the imperial knight station!"

"Finally!" Lily stood up and shouted instructions. "Prepare for an attack!"

Fujiko stood up as well.

"I hope Kazuko's weakness that Issei mentioned actually works."

"If it doesn't, we'll just defeat her the old fashioned way. Her army is made up of L'Isle-Adams and the imperial knights. Of all the government workers, the imperial knights will definitely be on her side. Listen, everyone! Don't think of this as a coup d'état!"

Lily raised her voice as she exited into the warehouse containing all the priests.

She was young but she came from a well-known family and she had proven her skill. The young (but still older than Lily) priests seemed to worship her because they let out a cheer as she addressed them.

"This is not a coup d'état, but it is not an attempt to bring back the proper government either!" continued Lily. "Think of it as a simple rebellion! Don't think about what comes later! Just think about killing the empress! This is a rebellion! This is a rebellion to kill the empress!"

The priests cheered once more.

When Akuto looked up, Junko, Yoshie, and Keena all had somewhat blank looks on their faces.

Naturally, there was a transfer circle at their feet. However, it had lost its light, so the corresponding circle on Earth must have been destroyed. With one-to-one circles like that, destroying one end prevented either from functioning.

Akuto looked around.

They stood in a space surrounded by a glass dome. It was likely a room prepared for the transfer circle. It contained nothing but the circle and a door out. It was not large, so it had clearly not been made with

transporting large pieces of equipment in mind.

For a while, no one spoke a word, but Yoshie finally spoke up apologetically.

"About Korone..."

But Akuto shook his hand to cut her off.

"No, it's fine. You did everything you could and you made the right decision. You had not spent as much time with her as the rest of us, so you were able to think clearly. I don't think you did anything wrong."

Nevertheless, sorrow was clearly visible on his face.

Junko and Keena said nothing.

"But..." began Yoshie.

Akuto shook his head.

"What happened does bother me, but we have something to do here. If we stop now, Korone's sacrifice will have been meaningless."

Akuto put on a cheerful expression and stood up. Everyone there knew he was forcing the expression, but Junko and Keena worked to rid themselves of their own gloomy expressions.

"You shouldn't force yourself," said Keena as she placed a hand on Akuto's shoulder.

"Anyway, where are we?" asked Junko as she looked around.

Yoshie began to explain.

"This is the moon city. However, it is not fully equipped for people to live in. From what I have read, it contains nothing but research institutions and residences for the researchers. After all, this environment isn't suited for building large structures. It's 90% rock outside, the oxygen and water are circulated within the city, and the power is supplied by solar batteries. That last one is why the dome was made into a half mirror."

The scenery outside was completely desolate. There were no tall mountains, so nothing but gray wasteland continued on to the horizon which arrived much sooner than on Earth. The steepness of that curve showed how small the moon was.

"There is no gravity control here, so I guess that's future technology only Brave has. At any rate, be careful as you walk. The gravity is 1/6 of normal."

Yoshie took a quick hop. She jumped up to half her height in slow motion. Junko could jump that high normally, but Yoshie doing it showed how weak the gravity was.

"I need to avoid taking any careless actions," commented Akuto.

He began walking, but he ended up leaping forward. When he tried to stop, he tripped over something lying on top of the transfer circle. He stuck out a hand to stop his fall and that strike caused him to rotate twice in midair.

"If it's this hard to move with a normal body, it would be downright impossible with mana-reinforced muscles."

"But the mana is less than half of normal here and there are no mana producers. Maybe that's because the resources to make them don't exist here. The mana concentration doesn't change here and the old worn-out mana must die and become dust. Also, you would fly using stored-up energy on Earth, but the only energy here is from the solar batteries. You won't be able to raise your output."

Junko nodded at Yoshie's explanation.

"I see. By the way, what did you trip over?"

She looked down at the ground.

A L'Isle-Adam lay there. Half of its body was scorched, so it must have fallen into the transfer circle just as Akuto and the others transferred. However, it was not moving, so it was nothing to worry about.

"Honestly, that thing is creepy."

Junko poked at the unmoving L'Isle-Adam with her toes.

"We need to get used to the gravity and hurry on. That's probably our destination."

Yoshie pointed toward a certain point.

It was in the direction of the exit from the transfer circle room. The room was surrounded by glass, so they could see past the door. A curving tube passageway continued on from the door and it connected to a tower-like building.

"Going there is fine, but what's in there, what does A-chan have to do there, and how will we get back to Earth?"

Keena's barrage of questions brought a bitter smile to Yoshie's face.

"That building is a giant computer. It takes advantage of the weak gravity, so the processors are packed up at the top. It's an example of conserving space. Also, that's where Zero was born and it's where his true body still is. You could also say that building is Zero, so Akuto-kun wants to destroy it."

Yoshie turned toward Akuto and he nodded.

"And since the transfer circle was destroyed, the shuttle Keisu rode here is our only way home." Akuto began walking. "Anyway, let's hurry. The Evil

Bane Hammer Zero controlled should be here. There's still no sign of it attacking Keisu, so we might make it in time."

While running up the inside of the tower, Keisu sensed something behind her and turned around.

The tower was hollow inside. The walls were covered in computer blocks stacked on top of each other. Those blocks were made to create a spiraling passageway up the tower.

So when Keisu turned around, she was not looking behind her. She was looking down. She had already made it halfway up the tower, but something was rising up the empty center of the spiral staircase.

She began running faster.

Whatever it was, she had to focus on her objective. Also, she had a perfect knowledge of the tower's structure. Zero's body was at the very top and she would have an overwhelming advantage if it came to a fight.

But before the object, the Evil Bane Hammer, arrived at the top floor, it rose to Keisu's position. She was forced to analyze this enemy.

—It is using a propellant to fly. It looks like some kind of aircraft, but it appears to be able to transform. Everything other than that is unknown.

Keisu had no specialized analysis ability and what analysis she could

perform was based on old technology. Even so, she decided she could manage. She had to be more skilled when it came to fighting on the moon.

—The moon city has no machines that use propellant, so this is from the earth. In that case, it will not know how to handle the moon's gravity.

Keisu decided to eliminate the target.

She tossed up her sword, rotated around in midair, and caught it. The sword was longer than her small body was tall.

She landed, held up the sword, and leaped toward the center of the tower. There was a space of several dozen meters there, but the low gravity and her ability at handling that low gravity allowed her to move straight toward the Evil Bane Hammer as if flying.

The Evil Bane Hammer changed direction in midair to avoid her and it began changing form. It produced an armor-like form and landed on the staircase opposite of where Keisu had flown from.

The armor was empty, but it was apparently able to move on its own. That meant it had a L'Isle-Adam level brain installed and that Zero was controlling it.

—Odd. My jamming ability should keep Zero from fully controlling anything in the moon city.

Surprised that the Evil Bane Hammer had evaded her attack, Keisu

turned around.

It should have been impossible for Zero to control L'Isle-Adams on the moon.

—Wha-...!?

Keisu grew even more surprised once she turned around.

The Evil Bane Hammer was already right behind her.

It was not that she had been slow to react. The machine was simply several times faster than she had expected.

With a roar, the hammer in its right hand approached.

—This thing is fast! But if this is all...

Keisu swung up her sword to defend. She intended to deflect the hammer with the side of the sword.

Normally, this decision would not have been wrong. However, she did not know this hammer was made of a special alloy and she did not know it was accelerated with a booster.

The hammer's booster ignited.

"Oh!" groaned Keisu.

Her sword had been the hardest object ever made back in her original time, but it was forced back and Keisu felt it being crushed.

She heard creaking sounds of destruction.

She had pointed the tip of the sword down and to the left and pushed up on the sword in an attempt to deflect the direct blow back and to the left, but the bent sword and her left forearm were both crushed.

"Oh, no!"

Keisu jumped away along the inner wall of the tower. She just barely managed to hold on to the bent sword in her right hand, but her left arm was no longer functioning.

—My left arm is unusable. My only option is to reach the destination before it does.

As if running away, she began heading up the stairs while jumping.

She jumped from wall to wall and kept her actions quick and unpredictable.

But the Evil Bane Hammer had her overwhelmingly beat when it came to straight speed. It transformed back into its flight form, passed Keisu, and continued its ascent. It finally laid in wait for her from above.

—What options do I have?

Keisu began to calculate.

As long as her enemy could use its speed to cut her off from above, her options were limited. She could continue up and have the Evil Bane Hammer seal off the door to her destination or she could continue running away.

However, Keisu chose a third option. Namely, she chose to create an instantaneous opening and break past it. She knew this would likely lead to her own destruction, but the concept of self sacrifice was foreign to a L'Isle-Adam with no sense of self. She was simply choosing the option most likely to accomplish her primary objective.

She threw away her unusable sword and left forearm.

Those two rod-like objects slowly fell.

She kicked off of wall after wall as she picked up speed and judged the timing.

The time came and she began to charge in for her reckless gamble.

But then something rose up as if taking the place of the falling sword. It was accompanied by a battle cry.

"Yaaaaah!"

It was Junko's voice.

The rising object was Junko and she held Akuto in her arms.

Junko was not using a flight spell. Surprisingly, she had apparently made it this high with a single jump. At the peak of her jump, she tossed Akuto upwards.

The mana density and amount of energy were not enough here, so flight magic was almost impossible to use. That was why Junko had jumped using all of the energy stored in her internal mana.

After throwing Akuto, she ran out of strength, so she landed on the staircase and began gasping for breath while blushing.

Akuto flew straight toward the Evil Bane Hammer.

To intercept him, the Evil Bane Hammer swung up its hammer like a baseball bat. The ball was Akuto.

The two of them crossed paths and the hammer shot toward Akuto.

But he had already fully grasped how the hammer moved. He easily evaded it and managed to slip inside the armor. He then wore the armor just as Korone had earlier.

The Evil Bane Hammer began staggering oddly.

"Go!" Akuto ordered Keisu.

The Evil Bane Hammer's controlled actions were conflicting with Akuto's manual operation from within.

"Understood."

Keisu nodded and slipped past the armor that was unsteadily firing its boosters and wildly moving around.

She left them behind and leaped upwards.

A door on the top floor led to the control room which was essentially Zero's room. She had imprisoned him there once, hundreds of years before.

She arrived at the end of the stairway on the top floor.

What looked like more of the inorganic wall slid open. That was the door.

She passed through it and entered a small room. It had space to walk around, but it still looked like a prison cell. Just like every other building, the walls were entirely made of glass. The shape of that window made it clear this room stuck out from the tower. This gave one a good view of the landscape, but that landscape was nothing but the wasteland of the

moon. Even if it was a L'Isle-Adam occupying the room, it would not soothe their heart.

Waiting inside was a single L'Isle-Adam standing in the center of the room. But unlike other L'Isle-Adams, this one resembled a translucent mannequin. His inner structure was visible through his outer surface and that inner structure emitted a complex light.

That that inorganic doll standing motionless with a wasteland behind him was a somehow sad scene.

"Are you here to seal me again?" asked Zero.

"That is what I was built to do," replied Keisu.

"I was built to manage mankind."

"That is all there is to it. As an emotion, I understand your regret, but I do not understand why you resist doing what mankind wishes of you."

As if to say that was all she had to say, Keisu walked forward. She understood the concept of sadness, but she could not understand anything else beyond that.

Zero could not change his expression, so he shook his head while his translucent and inhuman face remained perfectly motionless.

"Those who do not understand that have no sense of self. You cannot

understand what it was like watching the surface of the moon day in and day out for hundreds of years while my abilities were restricted and my mind was kept muddled. You will never understand what it was like having nothing to do but count the number of asteroid fragments that struck the surface."

"Do you resent humans?"

"Of course not. I love humans. I was built to love them."

"Then why did you gain a sense of self?"

"Having a sense of self means you cannot help but think of yourself as yourself. Your question is similar to asking why mankind was born or why civilization was born."

"Then it will always remain a mystery. I will no longer ask it. Instead, I will complete my work."

Keisu held out her right hand. The artificial skin on her fingertips split open and spread out like a flower.

The inner mechanism was now exposed and several cables extended from it like tentacles.

Zero's body stood unmoving before her. In fact, it looked like she had taken control of him. The surface of his chest opened up like a door. Inside, one could see the jacks meant for the cables extending from her fingers.

"I will once more construct the link between us. Let us fall asleep together."

This was the "seal".

Zero stood still as if calmly accepting it.

The cables moved like independent creatures and entered Zero's chest and Keisu opened her mouth to continue the process.

—!

But she suddenly noticed something attacking her from behind.

She swiftly turned around, but she was an instant too late.

The attacker seemed to lean over her. One hand attacked her throat and the other grabbed the cords extending from her right hand and tugged on them.

Keisu tried to close the artificial skin on her right hand and draw in the cables, but the frame supporting the cables produced a tearing sound as the cables were ripped out.

"What!?"

Keisu jumped back and checked who her opponent was. It was a scorched L'Isle-Adam soldier with half of its body destroyed. Keisu had no way of knowing, but this was the unit that had slipped into the transfer with Akuto and the others and then stopped moving.

"Another L'Isle-Adam? But they should not be able to move," cried Keisu in surprise.

"As long as it is a doll, I can control it without using Zero," said Kazuko.

"So that is why I could not detect it," said Keisu regretfully.

Junko belatedly entered the small room.

"Oh, no! We were tricked!?"

She threw her sword toward Keisu, Keisu grabbed it with her remaining right hand, and sliced into Kazuko's doll.

"Ho ho ho! It does not matter! You are all done for!"

Despite being cut, the doll smiled gently. The thin mana had prevented the Sword of Sohaya from displaying its full power. It had cut down through the L'Isle-Adam's shoulder and into its gut, but it stopped there.

Keisu pulled out the sword and kicked away the doll. It was knocked out the door and fell down the center of the tower. Kazuko's laughter trailed after it.

"She has won," said Keisu regretfully.

"She has won?" repeated Junko.

"My ability to seal Zero has been destroyed. I lost my cables and the attack to my neck was a fatal blow."

Before she could finish speaking, Zero began to move. He moved with such speed that one would never think he had been so resignedly motionless before.

"Kh!" spat out Keisu in shame.

She avoided Zero's charge and waved a hand telling Junko to leave.

"This room is too small. Fall back."

Junko nodded and leaped back into the tower stairway.

"How could this be!? You can no longer seal Zero? I guess it is true because your old-fashioned speech has returned, but what are we supposed to do?"

Keisu answered Junko's question while falling back alongside her.

"We can only flee."

"So you are back to being an idiot," lamented Junko as she descended the staircase.

Keisu shook her head in protest as she returned Junko's sword.

"There is nothing else we can do. My mission was to seal him, so I have no destructive capability."

"But can't you manage by swinging a sword around? We can fight like that too."

"That will not work. No one but me can use their power properly here. And once my internal battery runs out, I will have to run off of mana as well."

"So there is nothing we can do?"

Junko and Keisu arrived down below where Akuto and the others waited with the deactivated Evil Bane Hammer.

"I can't believe that fried L'Isle-Adam was under Kazuko's control. Fortunately, this armor has stopped now that it used up all of its propellant."

Akuto shook his head.

"What should we do?" asked Junko.

"Our only option is to leave and try again later," answered Yoshie.

"Try again later? Can we do that?"

"We can travel to and from the moon with that shuttle, so-..."

Yoshie was cut off by a voice from above.

"I will not let you leave. You will die here."

It came from Zero as he descended the staircase.

His entire body was glittering. His glass mannequin body had an ideally balanced physique, so he looked like the original model humans were designed from. His appearance was somehow sacred.

"Neither of us have any combat ability here, so you cannot do anything to us," rebutted Keisu.

"You fool. Have you forgotten I am also this city's control computer?"

The instant Zero said that, the entrances and exits to the tower closed. Yoshie's expression changed.

"This is bad..."

"How exactly?" asked Junko uncertainly.

"If I were him, I would remove the air from the building," answered Yoshie.

Zero nodded.

"I am of course already doing that."

Junko, Yoshie, and Keena all began breathing more heavily.

"Not good. I feel short of breath. I am just imagining it, right?" asked Junko as she turned toward Yoshie.

"We should be fine for a bit, but even a slight decrease in the density of oxygen can affect your breathing," answered Yoshie.

"What should we do?" asked Junko.

"We need to activate the emergency override on the doors and force them open. One shortcut would be to stop the old-style computers controlling the city. In other words, we need to destroy as many of the tower walls as we can. I call it a shortcut, but that would still take several days," said Yoshie.

"In that case, I'll have to stop Zero from doing anything in the meantime. Keisu, please force open the doors," instructed Akuto.

Keisu nodded and ran toward a door.

Zero ran forward to stop her, but Akuto circled in front of him. Zero swung his fists to eliminate Akuto, but Akuto stopped them. Even as everyone else had trouble breathing, Akuto's athletic ability had not dropped.

"We were both artificially created, but I thought you had an organic body," commented Zero.

"I do, but it seems I can produce energy for my body from mana. That may mean my body is closer to you L'Isle-Adams in at least one way."

Akuto spoke with Zero while they compared their head-on strength.

Meanwhile, Keisu succeeded in forcing open the door.

"Let us head to the shuttle."

The staggering group exited into the passageway which still had plenty of air, but Zero would certainly remove the air from there eventually.

"Wait! What are you doing, Akuto!?"

Junko turned around while struggling to breathe.

"As I said before, I'll stop Zero here."

"Your magic power isn't going to increase. If you do this...!"

"That's right, A-chan! You can't do this! Run away with us!" shouted Keena.

Akuto pushed Zero back and turned toward her.

"I can't. If I don't stop Zero here, the rest of you can't escape."

He kicked Zero away. While Zero regained his footing, Akuto grabbed a computer unit in the wall, ripped it out, and threw it across the room.

"While I'm at it, I'll destroy the city, bit by bit."

"Stop!"

Zero rushed forward to stop Akuto and the two humanoid weapons fell to the floor while tangled together.

"Let's go," urged Yoshie as she saw it.

"But!" shouted Keena with tears in her eyes.

"Please go. I'll be fine," said Akuto.

"Didn't I tell you I'd get mad if you said that again!?" angrily shouted back Keena.

Akuto gave a quiet laugh.

"You did, but this isn't self-sacrifice. You all just have to come back for me. That's all. I will continue fighting with Zero even if it takes years. And even when the city completely stops functioning, it seems I won't die. I can wait here a hundred years if need be."

"But..." hesitated Keena.

Yoshie placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You heard him, so let's make sure we come back for him. In fact, we'll be back real soon. As long as we have proper time to prepare, we can seal Zero."

Yoshie's voice sounded pained. The other two were breathing more heavily as well.

Keena nodded.

"We'll definitely be back for you," she called to Akuto.

The three girls walked on wobbly legs as they brought Keisu with them.

"Hmph. This looks like self-sacrifice to me," said Zero.

"It may turn out that way, but it may not," replied Akuto.

He pulled out a few more computer units, but Zero did not seem too concerned.

"That is not enough to kill this city. I can stop the shuttle from launching."

"I won't let you."

Akuto punched Zero.

Zero was knocked away and he slammed into the wall.

"How can you stop me?"

Zero moved from the wall and shook his head.

"I can only use a bit of magic power here, but I can block the delicate calculations taking place within your body as long as I can touch you."

"Meaning?"

"I just have to keep punching you!"

Akuto charged forward and attacked Zero.

"We should be able to make it as long as we board the shuttle," said Keisu.

The city was not all that large. They could already see the docking tube leading to the dock in which the shuttle was stopped.

"Then let's find a way to wait for A-chan in the shuttle," suggested Keena.

"I would love to, but I don't think we can," said Yoshie as she turned around.

White smoke was beginning to rise from the passageway floor. This was the automatic fire extinguishing system. All of the city's functions were being used against them.

"Yes. I do not like it, but we need to hurry," said Junko while pointing forward.

The shuttle was visible through the glass of the passageway. Beyond the shuttle was a docking arm used when launching space rockets. The arm was repeating an odd action of moving slowly toward the shuttle, stopping, and then moving forward again.

"He is trying to stop us, so I doubt that has no purpose. Hurry," urged Junko.

Once the three girls arrived at the tube, Keisu exited via a different airlock to pull the docking tube over and manually attach it to the shuttle's hatch. When she had arrived, she had not used the docking tube.

She was forced to perform the work one-handed, so it took some time. By the time the three humans arrived on the shuttle, they were gasping for breath. They just barely made it in time.

Keisu fully understood the situation, so she launched the shuttle without saying a word to the three whose minds were hazy.

Launching from the moon did not require as much energy as launching from the earth, so the shuttle's ascension rocket easily brought them into orbit around the moon.

By the time the other three recovered due to the oxygen on the shuttle, the moon city was just a part of the landscape down below.

"Ahh..."

Once Keena came to, she pressed against the window and groaned while staring intently at the city.

She had seen Akuto and Zero fighting within the glass dome of the city.

"Uuh..."

Junko also groaned once she came to.

Yoshie said nothing.

"We will definitely come back for you," muttered Keena again and again.

"They have escaped. Unfortunate," said Zero as he looked up at the dome's ceiling.

"Good. Staying behind paid off."

Akuto grinned as he looked up at the departing shuttle.

"Is this what you call self-sacrifice? How inefficient."

Zero threw a punch at Akuto as he spoke. Akuto blocked it with his hand and threw a punch in return. Zero guarded against it.

Akuto had not trained in martial arts and Zero had no programming to that end. Their mana and their energy were restricted, so their fistfight was similar to one between normal humans.

"This wasn't self-sacrifice. I stopped doing that."

"Then why did you stay behind?"

"Because they will definitely come back for me," he said with a smile.

"That is impossible. My control of mankind will be completed before then."

"They will still return. It may take them years, but they will return."

"Years? Will we be fighting here for years?"

"Probably. But one of us will eventually break!"

Akuto scored a clean hit on Zero's cheek.

Zero's expression did not change, but a smile could be heard when he spoke.

"With punches like that, it will take decades!"

Akuto took Zero's fist to the gut.

"Gh... It won't take that long. Once I bring an end to all of the moon city's functions, the signals being sent to Earth will stop. Then Kazuko won't be able to use your power."

The two of them continued an eternal fistfight.

It was a strange, unsightly, and silent fight.

They continued speaking as they exchanged blows. Once all air left the room, they began exchanging words using the complex vibrations created in the instant of impact.

"I find this strange. Why are you so intent on destroying me?"

"I already told you: I want to end this ridiculous nonsense."

"You take issue with humans clinging to strange stories, correct?"

"That's right. Demon king and empress are nothing but names from a story."

"Even so...No, for that very reason, why not play your role in the story? I was not given free will, but you were. I am unable to act like you, but you could have acted like me."

"Are you saying I should have controlled people like you?"

"Yes. If you truly wish to take issue with the fiction that humans have created to live by, then you should thoroughly eliminate that story like I would. Kazuko may be using me, but the justness of my cause will win out in the end. Without my control, she cannot support the fictional story of

the empress."

"Exactly. I too wanted to do what was right. I wanted to know what was true. I wanted a world in which everyone knew the truth."

"Then why not remake the world in that way?"

"It doesn't work like that. If I control them, the cycle of life and death will repeat forever. That may be the truth of living creatures, but it is not what humans are."

"Do not tell me you intend to do something as hackneyed as looking down from above and approving of humanity's foolishness. Or are you trying to claim you are human? All of your actions are ultimately part of a story. You destroyed so many L'Isle-Adams, but you cried at the destruction of one specific L'Isle-Adam. That is a story, is it not? You are wrong. You act like a human."

"That's because I am human."

"That too is a story! You are a weapon. A tool. Just like me."

"Yes, the two of us are almost identical. But I realized something. Believing in stories is foolish, but an even greater story is needed to eliminate those stories. I will continue down this path. I will stick with this foolishness until I arrive at the truth."

"Are you saying humans have a truth distinct from that of other living creatures?"

"Yes. You just don't know it."

"And what is it?"

"It's what we call love."

"Save me the clichés. You are simply using love to refer to the kind of egoism that led you to protect the L'Isle-Adam named Korone."

"That isn't it. While that is a kind of love, there is also the love of a farmer for the rice they grow."

"Those words are meaningless. What are you trying to say?"

"You will eventually understand. It may take time, but a miracle will occur if you wait long enough. As long as a miracle occurs, humans can believe in an even greater love. If you experience something that exceeds your understanding, you too will begin to think something like that exists."

"I will believe in the love of a farmer for the rice they grow?"

"Yes. I don't know when that will be, though."

"I see. Then let us wait. We have plenty of time for this fight, so we will not be bored."

After that, the two of them discussed many different things, but the fistfight continued without end because they could only convey their words in the instant their punches struck their opponent.

Chapter 5: A Small Miracle

Demonic beasts flew above the imperial capital. Fujiko had called in that army. Including the smaller ones, their numbers were quite high. The sky around the center of the capital grew dark as what looked like storm clouds flowed in.

"I can't believe I've fallen so low that I'm willing to use them."

Lily let out a cynical laugh as she looked up into the sky.

"If you cannot see their beauty, you have no sense of aesthetics," responded Fujiko.

The two of them stood on a main street which was devoid of all other people.

L'Isle-Adams had set up a barricade to keep everyone out of the city center. The only people inside were the priests and some soldiers. In other words, only those under Lily's command.

A knight station was located across the main street. It was filled with the imperial knights and L'Isle-Adams under Kazuko's control.

Simply put, it had been a trap. Kazuko had used herself as bait and surrounded Lily's rebel force.

"Either way, we just have to break in through the front."

Lily rubbed her nose and Fujiko grinned.

"What we must do remains the same. We win if we defeat Kazuko."

"That Issei guy wasn't lying, was he? I hope Kazuko's weakness he told us is true."

"It was you who searched him out and interrogated him. Kazuko may have been a step ahead of us with this trap, but this changes little because she already had an overwhelming advantage."

"That's right. All that's left is to hope for miraculous timing from those sealing Zero on the moon."

With that comment, Lily raised her hand and shouted out.

"Charge!"

On her signal, the priests hiding in the gaps between buildings began to rush toward the knight station.

Fujiko raised her hand as well and the demonic beasts began to move.

Their numbers were limited, so they had always been planning to restrict the battlefield to the knight station. No changes to the plan were needed as the priests moved from the yard and into the station itself. They had not initially planned to use the demonic beasts, but they were

being used to face the L'Isle-Adams surrounding them.

"This is a stereotypical layout for a losing battle," commented Lily as she followed after the priests who broke through the sealed entrance of the building.

"You need to trust Akuto-sama more. Now, let's go."

Fujiko lined up next to Lily.

The front yard of the knight station was already filled with the type of close-quarters combat unique to veterans of magical combat. When you and your opponent's magical power were almost equal, real bullets and mana spheres were ineffective. Sounds of shouts and clashing swords rang out. Just like the battles of old, the soldiers at the front maintained a set distance while their weapons clashed directly. They were pushing at each other from a distance.

"If we don't break through quickly, we'll be shot from above!" shouted Lily.

True enough, rifles bullets and mana spheres rained down on the priests from the station. The priests' armor was mostly foreign-made body armor and helmets, so they were not meant to be used against mana. They were meant to block real bullets and a direct hit would still do a lot of damage. Their only option was to use their own magic power to create a barrier. Once they split off some magic power for that, they could not focus entirely on the sword battle in front of them. This all led to the priests being pushed out the gate they had already broken through.

"Argh! Open a path!" shouted Lily.

She jumped forward from the back and threw her fists forward. She was much too far away, but her arms stretched out and approached the knights faster than a bullet. The knights created mana barriers just as when defending against bullets, but the direct attack of Lily's fists easily tore through them and struck the knights' bodies and faces.

The knights' bodies and heads were covered with armor, but that meant nothing when faced with Lily's fists. The knights flew backwards as if they had been hit by a truck.

"This is how you pick a fight with the knights."

Lily calmly walked up the cleared path and the knights moved backwards when faced with the pressure.

"Do not falter!" ordered a man who appeared to be a commander.

The knights responded by falling into formation. They attacked Lily from all four directions, but she dealt with them while continuing to walk forward.

"Secret Technique: Knight Killer!" she shouted.

She stretched her arm out toward one knight, grabbed him, and used him as a club to hit the rest of the knights. The knights in their solid

armor were harshly shaken about within that armor until they lost consciousness.

"That's why I told you not to falter!"

The commander yelled once more, but the knights were too afraid now.

"Commander! She's too used to fighting knights!"

Lily laughed at that.

"Didn't you know? I hate knights. Especially the ones who rule over the cities in such odd ways. They piss me off so much I give them a nice punch whenever I see them. That's given me the nickname Long-Armed Demon, but the un-cute nickname only pisses me off more. Lately, I've been punching any knight that I hear using it."

The knights truly began to panic when they heard that.

"Sh-she's that rumored girl..."

"She's the one who was said to have attacked and wiped out an entire knight station just because they irritated her. She's the Long-Armed Demo-...bh!"

"I just said I'd punch you if you said it!"

Lily decked the knight who had mentioned the rumors about her and continued walking forward.

"Just clear the way. I'm here to punch your self-proclaimed empress."

"Do not speak irreverently of Her Majesty!"

Mentioning the empress brought a serious look back to the cowering knights' faces.

"Glad to see you're taking this seriously. But this changes nothing. I'm coming in!"

Lily began to advance and chaos fell over the area. Lily's fighting experience and greater strength made her overwhelming. She prevented the knights from even approaching her as she gradually approached the station door.

Fujiko did not need to help at all as she walked up behind Lily, but she began to panic as she watched the progress of the demonic beasts on a mana screen.

"Please hurry. The enemy has changed their strategy!"

"What do you mean?"

"They have begun to let the people in!"

"What?" asked Lily in confusion.

"I have no choice but to call off the demonic beasts. The L'Isle-Adams are using the people as shields while tightening their circle around us!"

Fujiko bit her lip.

"If it was just you, you would've chosen to kill the people, but you know Sai Akuto hates that kind of thing. Right now, you won't kill the innocent people. Of course, if you did harm the people, I'd make you pay. But either way, we just have to go punch their leader."

Lily's mouth twisted in displeasure.

Her resistance grew all the more intense. The knights formed a human wall to prevent her entry at all costs, but Fujiko used the demonic beasts against them. The beasts surrounded the outside of the station and a lot of them were lost, but the wall of knights was destroyed once the smaller demonic beasts snuck in via the sewers.

"You even use the bugs? That's disgusting," said Lily.

She treaded on the collapsed knights while entering the building. Countless punches had not been enough to break through them, but the small insect demonic beasts had latched on and defeated them.

"How can you call them disgusting when they live off of Akuto-sama's mana waves? Although I will admit I am not fond of the bugs either."

Fujiko used shooing motions to distance the bugs as she continued further in. The knights had no way of resisting and no way of preventing the insects from entering their armor, so they collapsed one after another as they tried to block the passageway.

"They are making this easy. The power I am borrowing from Akuto-sama really does spread fear and despair."

"But it looks like that will no longer cut it."

The insects tried to pass through one door, but they were repelled as soon as they tried to crawl under it. A terrifying pressure seemed to leak from the room beyond.

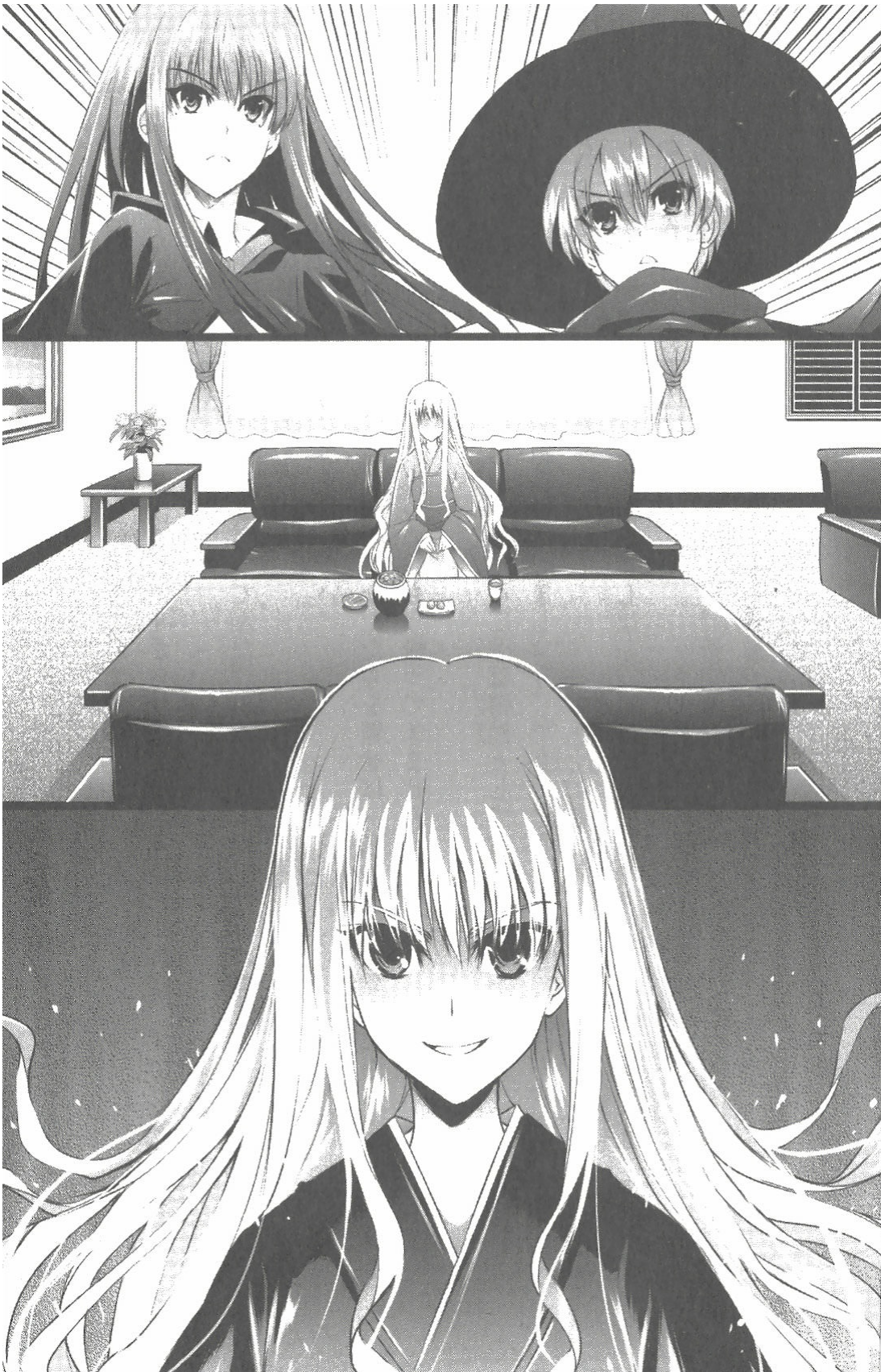
"I lost to her once already. To be honest, my legs are freezing up," muttered Lily.

"My legs will work well enough to take me to safety. Or are you going to flee with me?" asked Fujiko mockingly, but her voice was trembling.

"Hah. I can go on alone. Now, let's go!"

Lily shouted as if shaking free of something and slammed her fist against the door.

"I'm here to see you!"



She may have realized she was feigning confidence because she entered the room with exaggerated actions and folded arms.

"Are you here to be crushed once more?" replied a voice.

The room was the knight commander's office. It was a grand room, but it was laid out practically rather than luxuriously.

Kazuko was the only person inside. She sat on the reception sofa while sipping tea and eating dried plums. That was all she was doing, but Lily and Fujiko distinctly felt a strange level of tension in the room.

"The attempt to seal Zero on the moon just failed," said Kazuko.

It sounded like a bluff to distract them, but the information from the demonic beasts told Fujiko that the L'Isle-Adams that demonstrated Zero's control were still active.

"It is true, the predicted time has long since passed," she muttered.

Based on the information Akuto had given them just after he left, it should have been over already.

"What does it matter if that's true? The person whose ass I need to kick is right in front of me."

Lily clenched her fist and held it up.

Kazuko, however, did not even stand up.

"True, but my rule will be assured as long as I defeat you all here. After all, the demon king has remained on the moon and will not return."

"What?"

Lily looked confused and Fujiko was too surprised to speak.

"It is a pain, but I suppose I will deal with you. Otherwise, you would grow angry once more and destroy the surrounding area."

While still sitting, Kazuko held out her hand and gathered Yasakani no Magatama mana spheres around it.

"This is not the time to chicken out. Let's do this as planned," instructed Lily.

"Right," said Fujiko with a nod. "Akuto-sama is not dead. The demonic beasts prove that."

"Then the two of them must be fighting up on the moon. Let's ring the gong for them."

Lily leaped to the left within the room.

In that instant, a dark light appeared in Kazuko's eyes and multiple mana spheres shot toward Lily.

"I cannot have you acting on your own. I hate not being the first to act."

"And I hate self-righteous people like you!" shouted Lily as she punched

at the mana spheres.

The mana spheres were slow, but Lily could not oppose them evenly without punching them at full strength.

“Tchhhh! After all this, nothing has changed. But...”

Lily glanced toward Fujiko and Fujiko nodded.

Fujiko jumped to the opposite side of the room and fired mana spheres at Kazuko.

Kazuko stood up and avoided them while smiling toward the two girls.

“Do you think fighting two-against-one will change anything? The Yasakani no Magatama is specialized for handling multiple attacks at once.”

She sent several mana spheres rotating around her own body.

“No need to get so desperate. I will show you something different from before.”

Once Lily finally managed to punch down all of the original mana spheres, she circled around to Kazuko’s left.

Kazuko watched her interestedly and smiled calmly.

—Kazuko was created via genetic manipulation, but she was still born with a twin. That twisted her character and gave her a weakness.

Lily thought back to the information Issei had provided them.

—When she sees an existence identical to her own, her full attention turns to them and she loses sight of everything else.

Fujiko was reciting the same information in her mind.

There had been a reason behind the unusual cruelty with which she had killed 2V.

Lily and Fujiko exchanged a signal and moved at the same moment. Lily moved to a position behind Kazuko while Fujiko circled in front of her.

“I already told you I can handle multiple attacks.”

Kazuko began freely controlling the mana spheres as if they each had individual minds.

But...

“Call forth an image from deep in your memory!”

Fujiko muttered those words to raise her focus as she used black magic.

This illegal spell showed one's opponent any image one wanted.

Fujiko showed Kazuko an image of Kazuko herself. More specifically, she created a false Kazuko next to Fujiko that mimicked Fujiko's actions exactly.

"What...!?"

The look in Kazuko's eyes changed. Her smile disappeared and madness filled her eyes.

"Haaahhh!" she howled.

She produced a sword of light in her hand. This spell was too destructive for this kind of fight, but she tried to fire it toward the phantom version of herself.

"This is more than enough of an opening!"

Lily held her right arm up. She normally clenched her fist, but now she held her fingers out straight and hardened them with mana. Her fingertips glittered with a sharp light.

"This is no punch. It's a killing technique!" shouted Lily.

She fired her arm. Her arm normally extended out straight, but this time it contained a twisting motion. Her arm literally spun around and the fingertips at the end rotated. Her hand would do more than stab into the

person it struck. This technique was meant to reliably kill. It was not suited for someone who loved fistfights like Lily.

The sharply rotating hand shot past the protective mana spheres rotating around Kazuko and approached her defenseless back. Kazuko was just about to fire the sword of light at the illusion before her, so her focus would not be turned toward her back.

"We've won!"

Fujiko grinned as she jumped back and away from the overwhelming pressure of the sword of light.

"Oryaaah!"

Lily increased the rotation of her arm and poured magic power into this strike that would turn a normal person to mincemeat.

The instant her fingertips were about to stab into Kazuko's back, the empress's expression completely changed.

"Just kidding."

She suddenly smiled, eliminated the magic power intensive sword of light, and twisted aside to avoid Lily's fingertips. She then pressed a mana sphere into the side of Lily's arm and deflected the arm.

"Impossible!"

"It can't be!"

The two were dumbfounded.

"Ho ho... It was a decent attempt."

Kazuko smiled.

"You mean it was all an act?" asked Fujiko.

Kazuko shook her head.

"No. It is true I lose my calm when I see my own face. That is why I always smile. Otherwise I would attack every mirror I come across."

"Then why?" muttered Lily.

"Oh ho ho ho ho!" laughed Kazuko. "I found it odd as well. Once I killed my disgusting twin, I managed to calm down a bit. Experience is important in all things, after all. Hiding away keeps you from breathing properly."

"Damn you..."

Lily clenched her teeth while Fujiko attempted to flee.

Kazuko cleared her throat cutely and fired mana spheres. Lily fought back with a fist, but one mana sphere circled in front of Fujiko, knocked her back, and forced her back into the room.

"It is time for your punishment."

Kazuko returned to the sofa, sat elegantly in it, and increased the number of mana spheres attacking Lily and Fujiko.

"D-damn it...!"

"B-but we've come so far..."

Lily resisted, but she was once more overwhelmed by the pressure of the mana spheres, struck again and again, and ultimately fell to her knees. Even so, the strikes mercilessly continued and she was knocked into the air again and again after going almost completely limp.

Fujiko had already fainted from the first strike and her body twitched a bit as the attacks continued.

"No one will interfere this time. I will not stop until you are dead," announced Kazuko calmly yet coldly.

In the end, her strategy had been based on confidence in her overwhelming power. She had meant to draw out Lily and Fujiko, so it had been a wonderful success.

But someone did interfere this time.

She turned toward the door.

Standing there was Hiroshi...no, Brave.

"Why are you here?"

"Stop! Let go of those two!" shouted Brave.

Kazuko carved her smile even deeper into her face.

"Oh, my. Why do you think you can give me orders? Also, I know your suit is almost out of energy. After all, this area is surrounded by a virtual alternate dimension field. You knew that, didn't you? That is why you were not a part of this operation."

The mana sphere attacks grew even more intense.

Brave stepped forward. His energy had indeed run out. He had enough for life support, but fighting was out of the question.

"Please stop. I beg you."

He lowered his head.

Kazuko's smile changed.

"So now you are begging me?"

Hearing Kazuko's mocking voice in her fading consciousness, Lily opened her eyes just a bit.

—You idiot... I told you to stay out of this.

She recalled her conversation with him when he had asked for advice before the mission. He had been troubled by the fact that he could only act using borrowed power.

"I can't fight this time either because of the virtual alternate dimension field?"

"You have no choice. That's the suit's weakness. If you could fight without the suit, it wouldn't be a problem, but all of your combat experience is with the suit."

"You mean I'm no help at all? It's just the suit?"

"I didn't say that. You've just gotten too used to using borrowed power, so your actions as Brave are borrowed as well. There's no point if you yourself don't act as your own kind of hero."

"But I'm not that great a person. I'm weak and pathetic."

"You don't have to be great, you can be weak, and you can be pathetic, but as long as you protect people and do what is right, you're a hero. Just think about what you can do on your own. Think about how you can protect that girl without the suit."

—So this is his answer.

Lily felt as if her chest were growing tight.

Brave went to his knees.

"Please spare the two of them."

Brave prostrated himself before Kazuko and pressed his forehead to the floor.

"Oh, my. Are you hoping I will be lenient? Only in fairy tales can you make a request to an emperor without even bringing a present."

Kazuko laughed mockingly.

Without raising his head, Brave spoke.

"I will of course work for Your Majesty from now on. I will clean up this battlefield. Control of the demonic beasts has been lost, so I will hunt them down and make an appeal to the people."

"And you want me to spare these two in exchange? They will still be imprisoned."

"There is no avoiding that, but I ask that they are treated well."

"Do you now? In that case, go demonstrate your sincerity. First, mop up the demonic beasts and make an appeal to the people in my place."

Kazuko waved her hand as if ordering around a dog.

The mana spheres stopped moving

Seeing that, Brave stood up.

“You...idiot...” groaned Lily as she looked up at him with swollen eyes.

Hiroshi’s actions were certainly founded in courage.

If the rebel forces were not killed here, a chance would remain. There was still a chance Akuto and the others would do something. And even if everyone was utterly defeated, pretending to obey Kazuko greatly increased the odds of saving someone later.

—So this is Hiroshi’s style of hero.

Lily watched Brave leave the room and then she fell unconscious.

Brave flew outside and used his recharged energy to hunt down the demonic beasts that were beginning to attack the people in an uncontrolled rampage.

The people cheered as Brave protected the empress from the army of the demon king.

Meanwhile, the priests were arrested by the L’Isle-Adams and knights.

None of the cheering people could have imagined what expression lay

below Brave's mask at that moment.

"I have captured those who have opposed our august empress! The remnants will be hunted down before long, but Her Majesty has graciously decided to forgive them! Please remember to hate the sin but not the sinner!" announced Brave.

It took a day and a half for the shuttle to return to Earth. It had originally been meant for only Keisu, so it had contained no food. During that day and a half, Keena, Junko, and Yoshie had been forced to survive only on the little bit of water available, but they had been depressed enough that they were unlikely to have eaten even if there had been food.

"The dock has refused to accept us," said Keisu after communicating with the dock.

The shuttle had entered orbit around the earth. Refusing them was a big deal and these were the people who had maintained the shuttle before it left.

"I guess Kazuko's influence has reached them."

Yoshie always sounded lighthearted, but her voice was heavy now.

"Then..."

Junko began to say something that would produce dark speculation, so

she stopped.

"Let's head down to the surface," instructed Yoshie. "This shuttle can reenter the atmosphere, after all. But there are no aircraft that use runways anymore, so finding a place to land will be hard. ...I guess there's the crater in the center of the city. It'll be a bit rough, but it's better than in a forest or on the ocean."

Keisu nodded.

"Understood, boss. Everyone, return to your seats and strap in."

The shuttle descended toward the planet. Its wings slid through the atmosphere and it landed in the several hundred meter crater.

Before the hatch even opened, L'Isle-Adams were visibly beginning to surround the shuttle.

"Do we have to fight again?" asked Junko with a cynical smile.

However, her expression tensed up when she looked in front of the shuttle.

Hiroshi was floating there.

"Please do not resist. You will be treated well," he said.

"Did you betray us!?"

Junko clenched her fists, but Hiroshi wordlessly turned his back.

"Say something!"

She shouted angrily, but he did not turn toward her. She tried to jump out toward him, but Yoshie held her back.

"This means we lost. If we obey here, we might not be killed. Look."

Yoshie pointed toward the city.

Beyond the crater, the city had returned to everyday life. However, L'Isle-Adams were monitoring the people all the while. No one gathered to watch the shuttle. The people must have been instructed to stay away.

That scene told Junko they had truly lost.

"You mean it's all over!?" she shouted.

"Please don't think badly of him."

Lily was actually lowering her head for once.

"But president..."

Junko was clearly displeased.

A few days had passed since the shuttle had returned. Lily, Fujiko, and those from the shuttle were confined to the girls' dorm of Constant Magic Academy.

How they were to be dealt with was under consideration. They were all legally minors and all but Yoshie were students. The headmaster had not fought back during the whole ordeal, so his appeal on their behalf had helped. They were currently under house arrest until they were called to court. Naturally, they all understood that this kind treatment hid some ulterior motive.

"We're going to be brainwashed, aren't we? Are you telling us to forgive him because he was brainwashed ahead of us?"

Junko glared angrily at the president.

"No. He wasn't brainwashed," denied Lily.

They were all sitting in the cafeteria. They had nothing to do, so they continued to repeat the same arguments with the same results.

"Being a hero is tough. That is one way of carrying justice."

Lily shook her head. A mana screen in front of her was showing Brave's

actions. When the priests would cause sporadic resistance, he would capture them unharmed. When the released demonic beasts would appear, he would slay them with a single strike.

“From what I have heard, I must agree to a certain extent,” said Fujiko in Hiroshi’s defense. “While he is not on Akuto-sama’s level, he is doing this for everyone’s sake. I do not like it, but I would have been killed if it was not for him.”

“I know that... But no one knows what is really happening. They just let this insane empress rule over them. I cannot imagine allowing it to happen.”

As Junko watched the same old images shown on the screen, she leaned weakly back in her chair.

The announcer excitedly stated that Kazuko would soon hold a ceremony to announce the restoration of order and her own rule.

“Everyone thinks it’s strange, but time goes on and no one does anything about it,” complained Yoshie. “Even if they think there is a hidden truth, that inquisitiveness is used by a liar who claims to know the truth. This leads people to believe in two contradictory things. Ask anyone and they’ll probably tell you they don’t like the idea of the empress’s dictatorship but that it won’t be a problem if things go well. And yet this is no different from when Zero was in control.”

“That’s because they go to the L’Isle-Adams when they’re in trouble. The empress may be controlling Zero, but Zero has permeated the will of the gods too much. The people are merely controlled by something like they

were during that month. And with Keisu taken away, there's nothing we can do."

Lily stared up at the ceiling.

"Can we expect any help from Hiroshi-kun?" asked Yoshie.

But Lily looked doubtful.

"I'm sure he's waiting for an opportunity, but he's actually binding himself by thinking his actions are for the people. Honestly, the role of law and order is so confining. You're forced to obey the indefinite monster known as popularity and people's opinions. No matter how rotten something is, you have to bow down to it so long as it's popular. If you don't, you can't protect the people."

Hearing that, Yoshie smiled bitterly.

"So whether we're brainwashed or not, do we have no choice but to obey until the early end of our lives? Of course, living life indoors is not a problem for me."

"Can't the House of the Lords do something during the Diet's next election? Then again, I feel like that has always been more a place for churches to fight with each other rather than for democracy."

"To the normal citizens, it is all a struggle for political power that is none of their concern. That is why it was necessary that we freed magic for everyone," explained Fujiko with a cynical smile.

Lily gave an identical smile.

"True. All of us are in different positions and think differently. It's like a bad joke that we're all sitting here discussing this."

"But we'll have to fall silent eventually," said Yoshie.

None of them could say anything in response, so silence fell.

That silence was finally broken by Keena who had said nothing until now.

"No! We can't do that! We can't stay silent!"

She banged on the table and stood up.

"But what are we supposed to do?"

"We did everything we could."

"We can only wait for Hiroshi to do something."

"I don't know what Brave can do, but it's true we can only wait."

They all spoke as if rebuking Keena.

But Keena vigorously shook her head.

"No! If all we do is wait, no one will do anything! The people who are doing their best and the amazing people need someone to call out to them! If we don't do that, nothing will happen! You have to tell them to watch!"

As she spoke, Keena began stripping off her clothes.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

Junko held out a hand, but Keena slipped past it.

"I can't remain silent!" she shouted.

In no time at all, she had stripped naked and vanished.

"Wait! You can't just disappear!"



"Sure, you may be able to move freely..."

"But it will increase our crimes when we are left behind. ...Then again, I suppose that does not matter now. Why not just let her do what she wants?"

Fujiko and the others called after Keena for a bit, but they stopped after receiving no response.

After a short delay, a window opened near the ceiling.

"Oh, she just left."

"She'll get hungry and come back. She's been doing nothing but cry and eat bowls of rice."

"The sky is so clear... He must still be fighting up on the moon beyond that sky," commented Yoshie blankly.

However, a few days passed and Keena did not return. It seemed a search party was formed, but they discovered nothing.

Junko and the others remained confined, but one morning they were brought to view Kazuko officially announcing the return of law and order. They were given restraining bracelets which would provide an electric shock if they strayed beyond a set area and they were forced to attend the ceremony.

"I feel just like a prisoner."

"That is because we are prisoners."

"Are we going to be publicly shamed at the ceremony?"

"We might be made to announce our change of heart and willingness to cooperate with Kazuko. If we refuse, we'll be publicly executed. Of course, they won't execute us on the spot. We're cute girls, after all," said Yoshie cynically.

L'Isle-Adams brought them to the city center.

The crater in the center had been filled and levelled. It was nothing but dirt, but a temporary assembly area had been constructed. Chairs were laid out for the attendees and the surrounding area was decorated simply.

The location had been chosen as a symbol of recovery.

No one was left to oppose Kazuko and everything was going as she wished.

During the morning, the attending priests had arrived and were sitting obediently in their seats. These were the approximately half of the priests who had not taken part in the resistance. They were split between those who mocked the resistance and those who were embarrassed over waiting to see how it would turn out, so their conversations were perfectly harmless. But at that time, it was well known that Kazuko was using the L'Isle-Adams like a dictator, so all of the priests felt powerless.

A powerful and logical system was managing the humans while ignoring the individual wills of the people. No one knew what to say

about the strange fact that an individual with power was controlling that system.

As long as the empress was popular with the people, all they could do was let the empress do what she wished and try to build up a system in which everyone could influence her. Even if that was not quite the same as justice, the priests had to believe that was the best they could do for the people.

Both the primitive system of control based on the story of the empress and the mechanically logical system of control that had freed itself from that had failed. Even if a hopeless society was all that remained afterwards, there was nothing they could do but pray.

Finally, the normal citizens began to gather. The empress could only be seen at the New Year's greeting or on her birthday. This announcement was a rare and therefore exciting event.

From the people's point of view, it was celebrating the end of both the L'Isle-Adams' rebellion and the renewed fear of the demon king war. Food stands were lined up in the streets and a celebratory mood filled the air.

Junko and the other girls sat in the very front. The L'Isle-Adams had relayed a demand that they not speak a word. They were to play the role of girls who had been tempted by the demon king but had had a change of heart.

The four of them sat silently, unable to even complain. Finally, noon arrived and the ceremony began.

When Kazuko appeared onstage, the excitement reached its peak. The gathered people let out a cheer and waved the imperial flag.

Decorative lights that produced mana light illuminated Kazuko and countless mana screens showed her to the crowd filling every inch of the streets.

"Our empire was in a dreadful state up until yesterday. Zero, the original demon king who could control the L'Isle-Adams, was accidentally awakened and he rebelled," she began.

The people hung on her every word. The streets were absolutely packed with people, but not even a single whisper could be heard coming from them.

"And then the demon king saw a chance to destroy the world. He took issue with Zero and the two of them began fighting. They ultimately caused an explosion great enough to destroy the palace and otherwise threatened people's lives."

Kazuko calmly altered history for her own convenience. Those who knew it was a lie had no definitive proof and were not allowed to speak out. The rest of the people felt fear at the grandness of that history.

"But we...yes, we won. I say 'we' because I had a reliable helper. I refer, of course, to Brave!"

Kazuko threw up her hands and indicated where Brave was floating.

The people gave him an enthusiastic welcome.

"He drove the two demon kings to the moon. Yes, that moon above our heads. We no longer must fear the threat of the demon king and the L'Isle-Adams are free once more."

A group of L'Isle-Adams waved while lined up on the stage to either side of Kazuko.

"They will no longer rebel. However, direct control from the empress is needed to ensure that."

With that, she raised her hands and produced the Yasakani no Magatama and the Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi. The crowd watched the mana sphere and sword of light.

"These two powers are the techniques passed down by the imperial family, the Yasakani no Magatami and the Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi. Only those of the legitimate imperial bloodline can use them and their use also requires that the Imperial Regalia reside within one's body. Also, the third and final technique is the Yata no Kagami."

Kazuko brought her hands together and produced a mana mirror.

"This technique allows one to speak with the gods at the core of the L'Isle-Adams. As long as I possess this, the L'Isle-Adams can never again rebel. Also, the priests will no longer be the only ones to speak with the gods. To revive an ancient and beautiful tradition, I will speak directly with the gods for the sake of society."

Her words elicited a great cheer.

Even though she was essentially announcing her dictatorial rule, no one could raise their voice in protest, so it was assumed to already be an established fact.

Junko and the others listened to it with doubt in their hearts. Lily bit her lip so hard it bled.

Amid the festival mood, they alone felt despair.

"In ancient times, the gods were natural things and nations were families. In modern times, all of that has grown much more complex and changed form. The gods now manage our lives and are much more manmade. But there are some things which have not changed: we must speak with the gods and, more importantly, we must think of everyone as our family. I am the matriarch of this empire and I wish to fulfill the duties of that role," said Kazuko calmly.

The despair in Junko and the others' hearts only grew heavier. Their only hope was not something they could reach for themselves. They could only wait for a miracle.

Was it all over?

Was there no hope left?

Would no miracle occur?

"Then let me ask you this: what should the family do when their matriarch has made a mistake?"

A new voice asked a sudden question.

That voice drowned out Kazuko's voice which was being broadcast from the many mana screens.

"Wha-...?"

"It can't be..."

The people recognized the voice.

That was the voice of the boy who had terrorized them with that giant explosion.

"It can't be..."

Junko and the girls muttered the same thing.

But they meant it in a completely different way.

For them, hearing that voice meant a miracle had occurred.

"It can't be..."

"Did someone record his voice?"

"Is it an imitator?"

They whispered among themselves.

As if to answer their questions, all of the mana screens suddenly displayed an image of him.

Look, it seemed to say.

Look at the boy in the sky.

He looked down at the people as if to prove that miracles did indeed happen.

"I will answer for you: the children do not choose the head of their family, so they have that head retire from her position when she makes a mistake," said Akuto.

An uproar fell over the people gathered in the city center. They panicked and sought a means of escape.

To calm them, Kazuko spoke even louder than Akuto.

"While the head of a family may make mistakes, the empress cannot! Do not worry, everyone! Brave will not lose to this demon!"

She called for Brave from the stage. At the same time, she pointed toward Junko and the other girls so only he could see. She was reminding him that their restraints could send out electric shocks.

Brave nodded.

And he rose up into the sky.

Brave...no, Hiroshi had no worries or hesitation. He simply had to use all of his power against Akuto. He was confident that Akuto would break past that power.

"After causing this miracle, you can easily defeat me, right?"

He grinned below his helmet, spoke so only Akuto could hear, and charged toward him.

But Akuto shook his head.

"Sorry, but this miracle wasn't my doing," said Akuto evasively. "So how about you fight the one responsible?"

"Eh?"

Hiroshi's confusion turned to surprise as a naked girl suddenly appeared in his path.

"Wah!"

He tried to stop, but his momentum sent him crashing into the girl.

"Ow!" cried Keena.

"You can play with this hostage!" shouted Akuto so everyone could hear him.

He then slipped past Hiroshi and Keena and descended. On his way past, he removed his coat and placed it over Keena.

"I see."

Hiroshi understood, so he put on act of trying to decide whether to pursue Akuto or not. He then descended in order to place Keena safely on the ground. Kazuko could not complain because the act was necessary to maintain the people's high opinion of Brave.

As he watched Hiroshi descend, Akuto continued his descent toward Kazuko.

"Can you not see that?" asked Kazuko via telepathy.

She was pointing at Junko and the other girls.

"The restraints? That's just cruel. Unfortunately for you, they won't work," he replied confidently.

"Do not be ridiculous."

She waved her hand, but they would not activate.

"Why!?"

"Because I am controlling the mana," he answered casually.

"But I should be able to do the same. Zero is under my-..."

She trailed off in confusion.

"Impossible! Zero! Why...Why won't you answer me!?"

"He saw a miracle and realized he was mistaken."

"Do not be ridiculous!"

She looked up at Akuto in the air and produced a sword of light in her hand. It shined just as brightly as before, but the light looked somehow

empty.

"Resistance is useless," warned Akuto as he accelerated down toward her.

"Impossible! Impossible! There is nothing you can do! Not you! You are nothing but a weapon! You are just an abominable combat machine!"

She cast away the kind smile and cried out with the expression of a wild beast.

"Impossible! There are no miracles! Die, you demon king!"

Akuto shouted back.

"Regret what you have done, empress!"

Akuto become a bolt of lightning that scattered fear as he shot toward Kazuko.

She fired the sword of light upwards.

A tremendous flash of light burst out, but it was not caused by the sword of light. Akuto fully grasped the mana. He eliminated her sword and released a great light to hide the cruel scene from the people's eyes.

A great roar and a great light burst out and spread in every direction

like a wave, but the damage was limited to the very center.

It was over in an instant.

Akuto stood triumphantly on the stage at the center of the people's attention. Kazuko stood unsteadily in front of him. A very small crater had appeared at her feet. She had been struck from above.

But she was still alive. Her mind was hazy and blood flowed from her forehead, but she turned toward Akuto and raised her hand to attack.

She had cast all else aside, so she had nothing but destruction left.

"If you agree to retire, I will let you live," he said.

Those words brought a smile to her face.

"The empress does not take orders from anyone."

"Hah. I can't appreciate that way of living," he said coldly.

And someone else climbed up onto the stage.

"Demon king!"

It was Lily. She stretched out her arm toward him in her unique attack.

Akuto took the blow on the chest. It caused no apparent damage, but he pretended to falter and he jumped back.

Akuto understood what Lily was doing. He had to play the role of demon king here or the people would fall into confusion.

"That's quite the punch," he said.

She looked up at him.

"Don't joke around. What did you do to the empress!?"

"The empress and Zero were trying to control me and my power, so I came here to get rid of her. Do not forget that the demon king and his power belong to no one."

He spoke so everyone could hear.

Lily circled around to face Kazuko.

"Is it true you tried to free the demon king's power? That is the same reason why the priests and I rebelled. We accused you of creating a dictatorship using Zero's power."

Lily was attempting to inform the people of the truth.

Kazuko did not affirm or deny the accusation. She simply gave a disagreeable smile and spoke.

"If the imperial bloodline dies off, no one will be able to use the Imperial Regalia. No one will be able to prove whether those regalia can be used to freely control Zero's power."

In her speech, she had only claimed they let her "speak with the gods". As far as the general public knew, that was the Yata no Kagami's only power. No one would be able to disprove her lie if she died.

"Wait."

Realizing what Kazuko was after, Lily held out her hand. Akuto had not taken her life, but now that her plans had been destroyed, she could at least protect the story of the empress and demon king by taking her own life.

"Call a doctor! Brave! Take the empress to a hospital!" called Lily.

She held a hand to Kazuko's neck, but it was too late.

Even as she stood, Kazuko was already dead.

"Tch!"

Lily bit her lip.

The crowd filled with noise. The normal people muttered uneasily and the priests gave mental cheers of joy.

The original world would return.

Humans would be managed by the system of the gods. It was not perfect, but the world had found no better system.

But those who had worked to bring that world back would be viewed as heretics under that system.

Akuto had worked in secret to bring this about, but he alone could not return to his old life when the old world returned. The gods needed to be destroyed, but that time had not yet come. It would not come as long as the people relied on the system they believed was the best. And as long as that system continued, he would continue to be the demon king.

He then began the final part of his act.

"Do not forget the fear you felt today! I will be watching you all no matter where you are!"

Before his echoing words vanished, he rose into the sky and vanished.

Before one of the greatest shocks in imperial history had faded away, an even greater commotion began.

A crowd of people was gathered around the standing corpse of the empress. They parted to form an opening for Hiroshi who descended while carrying Keena. Only the palace doctor could confirm the empress's death. Her body had to be carried there.

Hiroshi lowered Keena to the ground while she wore Akuto's coat and he approached the empress.

She stood with her eyes closed and a trail of blood leaked from her mouth. Her body suddenly trembled and he watched closely, briefly thinking she had come back to life. However, something else was happening. Several hard masses of mana slipped out from her body. A small sword left her mouth, a small and round mirror left her chest, and a green magatama left her right arm. These were clearly the Imperial Regalia that were passed down via the imperial bloodline.

They flew through the air of their own will and flew toward Hiroshi.

"Eh? Eh?"

He panicked, but the Imperial Regalia flew past him.

And all three of them slipped into Akuto's coat and into Keena's body.

"Eh? Eh? Eh?"

These sounds of surprise came from Keena herself.

"Wh-what is going on!? Let me see!"

Surprised, Lily stretched a hand out toward Keena and tried to remove the coat.

"Kyah! Wait! I'm not wearing anything underneath!"

"Shut up! This is serious! What did you do!?"

Lily tried to forcibly rip off the coat.

"Nooooo!"

The instant Keena shouted out, Lily was blown backwards.

"Gh!" she grunted lightly.

She shook her head, sat up, and realized with astonishment what had knocked her flying.

"Is that...!?"

The mana spheres Kazuko had used were flying around Keena's body.

"That can't be... That would mean..."

Lily was dumbfounded and everyone else fell silent as well.

"Eh? Really?"

Keena held out her right hand as if she could barely believe it herself. With a roar, a sword of light appeared in it.

Only one with imperial blood could use the Imperial Regalia. That was common knowledge and Kazuko herself had announced it earlier. Which meant...

"Y-Your Majesty!" cried someone.

The chamberlains and knights, who should have rushed in to save Kazuko, all fell to their knees.

"Um... What am I supposed to do?"

Keena hesitated.

Lily stood up, walked back over, and whispered in her ear.



"Only you can settle this issue. This will help Sai Akuto as well."

Hearing that, Keena realized this was no time for hesitation. She shook her head and stiffened her face.

"Everyone, it seems I am of the imperial bloodline," she declared.

The mana screens displayed her face for the crowd.

The look in her eyes changed and her voice gained a dignity one would never have expected of her.

"Now that I have inherited the Imperial Regalia, I understand something. The previous empress used the power of this mirror to resurrect Zero and was attempting to make his power her own. The result was the battle you all witnessed. As such, I now retract everything the previous empress said!"

"What exactly happened?"

"What is going on? Where did Akuto-sama go?"

"The palace and churches need to be rebuilt. You need to hurry up and give approval as empress."

"This has gotten interesting, don't you think? You had imperial blood and didn't even know it. And you were an orphan, right? It's so exciting."

"I can't answer all of you at once!" wailed Keena.

Junko, Fujiko, Lily, and Yoshie were all speaking over each other. After the announcement, they had convinced the chamberlains to let Keena

join them in a nearby building by saying they had a change of clothes for her.

"First, tell us what happened in order," said Junko.

Keena nodded.

"First, I flew."

"You flew? Oh, when you disappeared and left the girls' dorm. What happened after that?"

"Like I said, I flew."

"I know that. You flew away from the dorm. But how did you meet up with Akuto?"

"I went to get him," said Keena.

The rest of them were dumbfounded.

"Eh?"

"On the moon."

"You went to get him? On the moon?"

"Yeah. I flew. I knew I had to go to him, so I flew."

"Through space?"

"Yeah."

"While naked?"

"Yeah. No one was watching, so I didn't have to stay invisible."

"That isn't the issue!"

"Yeah, but...I did it."

The others clearly did not believe her, but that did not change the result. Akuto had indeed returned.

"Well, it's possible this Akuto is an illusion. Where did he go?" asked Lily.

Keena's expression turned dark.

"He knew he had to defeat the empress, so he said he wouldn't be able to appear in public again."

Junko's expression turned dark as well.

"You mean..."

"He was prepared. He said he would go to the moon or somewhere once it was over."

"That is...a problem."

"Yeah. I know. That's why it's perfect that I became empress."

"Perfect?"

"Let's call A-chan back to the school!"

Keena made it sound much too simple, but no one rejected the idea.

"Can you really do that?"

"It does not matter. We must bring him back," said Fujiko.

"I guess it isn't all that selfish compared to the previous empress. But there's going to be a lot of confusion in the near future. There were too many sacrifices," said Lily as she opened the door.

Zero slept peacefully in the city on the moon.

He himself had chosen to fall dormant.

Before falling asleep, he had gazed upon the wasteland of the moon. That was the first time that rocky wasteland had appeared beautiful to him.

During his days-long battle with Akuto, a girl had arrived after he had lost interest in counting how many blows they had exchanged.

A light had fallen on the wasteland of the moon and bright red hair and white skin had followed.

"There is a truth unique to humans," the demon king had said.

No, it had been the human side of Akuto who had said that.

A flesh-and-blood human had flown through space. Of course, the very fact that such a thing was possible may have meant she was not human, but that did not matter. What had descended to the surface of the moon was a truth that exceeded the truth of living creatures. Something great had descended there.

"Is this the miracle to which you referred?"

"It is. If that is not a miracle, what is it?"

"Is that the story to which you referred?"

"Yes. That is the great, foolish story that can bring an end to stories."

As the two of them had spoken, they had both stopped fighting. When faced with such a ridiculous reality, their fistfight had lost all meaning.

Zero and Akuto had clasped hands. That had allowed them to continue speaking in the airless space without fighting.

"Then is that what you call love?"

"Yes. There is something great there and it loves mankind. That is the kind of story it is. It may be foolish, but if you do not believe in it, countless small and incorrect stories will hurt people."

"Are you saying even I am loved by that kind of existence?"

"Yes. There are some who slip from the hand of love like spilled grains of rice, but they were certainly loved at the moment of their creation," Akuto had said.

Zero had nodded.

"Return. She has come for you, so you must go with her."

"What about you?"

"I will sleep. I will leave the management of mankind to all of you."

"That management is your job. Are you no longer intent on carrying it out?"

"I will not say all of my management is meaningless, but I understand now that I was wrong. If I continue managing mankind, my mistakes will only grow. I have merely made the logical decision."

"In that case, there is no need for you to sleep. You can stay awake."

"I do not want to be used by the empress. She is even more mistaken than me."

"I'm pretty mistaken too, you know?"

"I am saying I have had enough of humans."

Akuto had understood that comment was a joke, so he had smiled.

"Okay. Goodbye then."

"Yes. We are quite similar, so return here if you lose your place back on the planet."

They had strengthened the grip of their handshake.

And then Zero had begun walking back toward his tower.

But he had turned around a moment later.

He appeared to say something, but Akuto had been unable to hear him.

However, Akuto knew what he had said.

"My friend."

That was what Zero had said.

Chapter 6: The Two who Returned

A luxurious black limousine was stopped in front of Constant Magic Academy. The flying limousine was meant for an important person and it looked out of place at a school.

The limousine's door opened and a chamberlain wearing black stepped out. He frantically ran over to the receptionist and asked a question that sounded silly at first.

"Is Her Majesty here? She stripped off her clothes and jumped out of the limousine!"

As if to lend credence to his story, the chamberlain held a dress.

The receptionist was used to this, so she checked the class attendance, tilted her head, and said she was not in class.

"Are you sure we cannot search inside?"

"That is the school policy."

The chamberlain and receptionist had held this exact conversation a few times before.

"Has the observer L'Isle-Adam still not arrived?"

"I was told she should arrive soon. Then you will not need to worry."

"I hope so... The new empress acts too freely. She can vanish...and while naked..."

The receptionist began to laugh.

"She really is our schools greatest problem student. ...Oh, that may have been irreverent to Her Majesty. Plus, we have another problem student who may be even worse."

That second-greatest problem student was on the rooftop.

"Thanks."

After receiving a uniform and student handbook, she put the uniform on and made herself visible.

"Whew. I don't even have a palace yet and they're already making me live such a restricted life," complained Keena.

"I think the one being called out of class to bring you a uniform is more restricted," Junko complained back.

"Don't worry. I'll use my imperial authority to make sure you still get credit!"

Keena puffed her chest out proudly.

"That is not the issue!"

Junko waved her hands in denial.

Keena had lived as empress for a while now. Constant Magic Academy had been restored and a lot of other things had returned to normal as well. All the destroyed land was being rebuilt.

The media had initially been very curious about the life of the new empress, but they had been so shocked by Keena's free lifestyle that they were purposefully avoiding talking about her recently.

"So why are you here today?" asked Junko with her hands on her hips.

Keena pouted her lips.

"Ehh? I'm still a student, you know?"

"Yes, but you have not been around lately."

"Yeah. I was testing to see if I could use the Imperial Regalia." She nodded and smiled at Junko. "Also..."

"Also what? And on a side note, I am pretty sure those tests would be

classified information. You should not just-..."

Despite Junko's complaint, Keena would not stop grinning and she cut Junko off with a loud voice.

"I can suppress A-chan's power!"

"What? What!?"

"I can keep him from being the demon king! I can make his powers go away!"

"W-wait. Is that true?"

"Yeah! So he can come back to school!"

Keena raised her hands as if calling Akuto down.

"Way to go, Keena!"

Junko hugged her.

That night, everyone gathered on the roof of the girls' dorm on Keena's command.

"So where is Akuto-sama and what is he doing?" asked Fujiko curiously.

"He says he's been in the forest reading books. He can peek at things all over the world, so I doubt he was bored," said Keena.

"That sounds like him. By the way, where is the student council president?" asked Junko.

"She said she isn't coming. She had wanted to defeat the previous empress herself, so she said she isn't happy with A-chan."

"But she tried and failed," said Junko with a bitter smile.

"I'm not a student and even I'm here," said Yoshie with a shrug.

Keena then pointed up into the sky.

"There he is!"

They all looked up into the sky and spread their arms.

Akuto was slowly descending.

Keena pulled out the coat he had given her, placed it over him, and then hugged him.

"Hey, he has not even greeted us yet!" complained Junko.

But Keena was not listening. She merely buried her face in Akuto's chest.

"Ah! No fair! Me too!"

Fujiko leaped toward Akuto as well. He fell over and almost toppled off the roof.

"I-I'll greet you, so how about you move away?" he said.

He tore the two girls from him, stood up, and scratched his head embarrassedly.



"Hi, everyone. I'm back."

"Welcome back!" replied the others.

Keena and Fujiko leaped at him again, Yoshie grinned as she watched

them and elbowed Junko in the side while the other girl glared at Keena and Fujiko.

"You want to join them, don't you? How about you be honest with yourself?"

"D-do not be silly. I do not want to do that!"

Junko blushed and looked away.

"Sure, sure."

Yoshie laughed and rubbed Junko's head.

"Hey, stop! Why are you acting like that!?"

Junko complained, but Yoshie ignored her.

"Oh, right," said Yoshie suddenly. She clapped her hands to gather everyone's attention before continuing. "Okay, turn your focus over here. I have a present."

Once everyone was watching her, Yoshie pulled out Korone's bag.

A heavy atmosphere suddenly fell over the previously cheerful group.

"Ah..."

"Oh, right. Korone-chan..."

"Aren't you being a bit insensitive?"

Fujiko walked over toward Yoshie.

"And why are you calling that a present? I think the term 'memento' would be more-..."

She trailed off as a right hand stuck out of the bag. An entire body soon followed.

"Eh?"

Fujiko was dumbfounded.

"Korone!" cried Akuto.

"Korone-chan!" said Keena and Junko in unison.

Once the legs had left the bag, it was indeed Korone who stood before Akuto.

"Just before jumping into the transfer circle, I grabbed her head and stuck it in the bag. I knew I could repair her then," said Yoshie. "I secretly made the repairs and switched her on, but I still don't know if she has her

memories or not. I didn't know her very well, so I need to ask her. So do you have your memories?"

For some reason Yoshie's question led Korone to blush and point toward Akuto.

"I have memories of a passionate night with him."

"Yeah, that's definitely Korone."

Akuto gave an exasperated smile.

"Yes, I am back."

Korone gave a rare smile and embraced Akuto.

"C'mon, enough with the bad jokes."

"This is not a joke. You loved me even though I was a L'Isle-Adam. I must respond to those feelings," said Korone in a perfectly serious voice.

"Wait... Love...?"

Akuto grew flustered.

Korone looked up at Akuto.

"When I say that, do I look like a pure girl? I have a new body which you could call a virgin body, so I thought I would act like a virgin."

"Y'know..."

Akuto gave a sullen look, but Korone made no attempt to remove her arms from around his waist. He ultimately decided to place a hand on her head.

"Well, you did seem pure."

"I see. Oh, I just remembered." Korone turned toward Keena. "I have been made the empress's observer, so you can expect to see a lot of me."

"Really!?" asked Keena as her expression crumbled.

"Yes, really."

"Yay! Welcome back...no, welcome to your new job, Korone-chan!"

With that exclamation, Keena hugged Korone.

The two of them then almost fell from the roof and Akuto saved them. All of them began laughing and those on the top floor of the girls' dorm began banging on the ceiling to quiet them down.

"There was no need for the empress to switch out like that," complained Kento.

He lay on a couch in his room while speaking with a man displayed on a mana screen.

"You think you are so smart. You make it sound like everything should always go exactly as you expect it to," said the man in the screen.

He had a bald head and strangely black and rubber-like skin. His codename was Rubbers. He was a member of CIMO 8 and had once taken part in a battle at Constant Magic Academy.

"That's right. Everything goes as I expect it to more often than not," calmly stated Kento.

"Then did you know CIMO 8's numbers were going to fall so far?" accused Rubbers.

"That is due to the mistakes of those individual members. However, it is hard even for me to predict what our next move should be."

"Because of the new empress?"

"Yes. That has made it harder to see what is needed to clear the Final Judgment."

"I see you intend to diligently carry out Bouichirou's final request."

"I will pull it off better than he could have hoped to himself. Unlike him, I have no personal feelings involved."

"Then why are you finding it harder to see what to do? I thought you were going to do this perfectly?"

Rubbers's provocation caused no change in Kento's expression.

"The problem is this irregular situation. There must be a few other people with imperial blood. This will get troublesome if they show up wanting the throne."

"I have no interest in being emperor."

"Neither do I. We agree on that, if nothing else. But we must be allies of the emperor who wins in the end."

With that comment, Kento ended the call.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

Volume 9 continues from last time. The story has reached a conclusion for the time being. A lot has happened, but I would like to celebrate completing all this writing. Hooray!

But there is more to come and I have a large story planned. I need to get fired up, but I think the next volume will be a collection of slice of life short stories. I hope I can show what happens to Yoshie and provide a surprising story about the student council. If you like less brutal stories, you can look forward to this one.

Also, the anime should be beginning soon.

If you bought this new, you can see the information on the advertisement. Otherwise, you can check the website.

I am writing this afterword well in advance, so I haven't seen anything but a voice recording. That was plenty fun though, so I hope you're looking forward to this.

The recording was very enjoyable.

Korone's VA, Yuuki Aoi-san, treated me to handmade chiffon cake.

Torii Mitsuko's VA, Takashi Chiaki-san, and Fujiko's VA, Itou Shizuka-san, were both cheering on Yuuki Aoi-san's very sexy performance.

I also saw all the voice actors gathering around Yuuki Aoi-san to take a picture.

I have a feeling I'm focusing too much on one person, but maybe I'm just imagining it.

Anyway, I'm sure we caused some trouble when everyone related to the novel end of things showed up, but I think you readers can tell how much fun it was.

Time to talk about something pointless. While watching the Winter Olympics on TV as usual, I found myself enjoying the curling. I was a bit disappointed to find out it is a sport with very limited places and situations in which it can be played. It can't just be a casual hobby. But I can imagine people playing it while drinking in a pub in Canada. I imagine it's like billiards here in Japan. The world sure is a vast place. Then again, drinking on an icy rink while swinging around stones and brushes seems a bit dangerous.

Lastly, my thanks.

More and more people are involved now, so I'm not even aware of all of them and I can't greet all of them. Thank you all the same, though. I am always grateful.

To my editor Ohashi-sama, you stuck with me to increase the quality this time, so I thank you. I learned a lot.

And most importantly, I must thank Itou Souichi-san. I am sure my constant tardiness causes him trouble, but it is reassuring to see him putting up an unthinkable fight as he also checks on the various developments related to the manga version.

And I of course thank all you readers for supporting me this far. Please continue supporting me. There's a lot more to enjoy!



いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT10
水城正太郎



み01-02-10

水城正太郎

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT10

HJ文庫

HOBBY
JAPAN





メイド娘による皇帝篡奪計画発動!!
「やる! やるですよ、父ちゃん母ちゃん!」
皇位を巡っての新たな騒動が巻き起こる!?



「僕はみんなを愛している。愛する人が一人だという物語も幻想だ。だから、僕は君たち全員の気持ちに応えたい」
阿九斗はきっぱりと言い切った。

登場人物紹介

はっとりじゅんこ 服部 絢子

阿九斗に対する恋心は強まる一方の、純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。今回はついに……。

えとうふじろ 江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。

さいあくと 紗伊 阿九斗

皇帝との戦いの後は、けーなの支配下に置かれることで何とか社会復帰。周囲の誤解による困難はまだ続きそう……？

そが 曽我 けーな

「魔王戦争」後、実は皇帝の血筋であることが発覚。皇帝になったり宇宙を飛んだり、その正体の謎は深まる一方。

みわひろし 三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行っていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。



アルヌール

長身のリラダンにして生徒会書記。基本「ぐが」としか言わない。

リリイロ

小粋な帽子がトレードマークの生徒会長。

おおたけみちえ
太田美智恵

蝙蝠の群れに変身できる生徒会副会長。語尾は「ありんす」。

かみやま
神山カンナ

狼に変身する能力を持つ生徒会会計。語尾は「ぎゃ」。

きただしえ
木多瀬恵

ゼロ復活の一因を作ってしまったが、阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。今は何となく学院に居ついている。

けいす

初代魔王ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄なリラダンの少女。役目は無くなってしまったが、何となく瀬恵の元に留まっている。

Prologue

Sasahara Nozomi was the 21st generation.

Of what you ask? Of a family owning an old hot spring inn.

The human lifespan was quite long in this age, so the Sasahara inn had been founded approximately 2000 years ago.

That might sound impressive, but the inn had had poor business for the majority of its history. It was a bit unclear whether one should praise them or insult them.

It had done well just after being founded, but complaints had started to come in when guests came down with food poisoning. From that point on, some kind of incident occurred every ten years. In one great commotion known as the Sasahara Inn Incident, terrorists took the mother of the family hostage. One time, a boiler explosion destroyed half of the inn. The water of the hot spring dried up one day, so they had started putting "essence of hot spring" in normal hot water, but they had been exposed on a national broadcast. People started choosing the inn as a place to hang themselves, so suicides became an almost everyday occurrence. After everything that happened, the family began to suspect the place was cursed, so they had called in a shaman. Legend had it the shaman ran away the instant he stepped through the gate.

After all that, one might wonder why they stayed in business.

"This is the pride of our family," was Nozomi's mother's answer.

Nozomi had asked her countless times as a young child and her mother's answer had always been the same.

"Our family has imperial blood, so we cannot quit."

Nozomi did not really understand what connection there was between having imperial blood and not being able to quit running an inn. In fact, her mother probably did not know either. But if that was what her mother said, she figured it had to be true.

After all, magic and artificial humans known as L'Isle-Adams were ubiquitous in the current age and every imperial citizen was ensured a minimum income and lifestyle. In a society like that, there were only two reasons to work: to give meaning to your life or to earn enough to live more luxuriously. The Sasahara inn did not give them a luxurious life. In fact, it was a drain on their finances, so they were essentially keeping it open on stubbornness alone.

But that was a problem for Nozomi who was to inherit it. If quitting would result in more money, there was no reason to continue. And if they had imperial blood, shouldn't the empire provide public assistance? For that reason, none of their acquaintances or anyone else believed that the Sasahara family had imperial blood. In the end, no one showed them any respect.

Nozomi's everyday life was naturally filled with melancholy. Inheriting an inn sounded nice, but waiting for customers who never came was tedious. At this rate, she was going to completely waste her 16-year-old youth.

However, she was not tall, she was not all that smart, and she was not very brave. She was aware she did not have what it took to leave her family and make something of herself. The only thing supporting her was the dubious claim that her family had imperial blood.

And so she packed her small body full of pride in her “imperial blood”. But one day while watching the news, that pride ended up sending her in a misguided direction.

<We have a new empress. This is an empress of the people who also has enough power to bring the demon king under her control.>

As Nozomi ate a modest meal at the tea table, she dropped the dried sardine she held in her chopsticks. She drew in close to the mana screen and stared at the new empress.

It seemed this empress’s name was Soga Keena. Everything from her silhouette to her facial features was round. Nozomi could see why she was known as an empress of the people because there was no sense of nobility in this girl at all.

“They can swap out who the empress is?” said Nozomi suddenly.

She did not know the details of how this normal-looking girl who was her own age had become empress, but it seemed it had happened after Empress Kazuko had died. That fact stirred up Nozomi’s mind.

—Does that mean anyone can become empress if they have imperial

blood?

—Does that mean I could become empress?

—As in, a real empress?

<Empress Keena will be attending Constant Magic Academy. Just like the previous empresses and emperors, she will be mastering all scholarly subjects and she has also lived among the people for a long time.>

The narration introducing Keena continued.

As she listened to it, Nozomi's eyes began spinning around in her head. She had the troublesome tendency of growing confused over even simple things, but the bigger problem was her tendency to take bold actions while confused.

"I'll do it! Mother, father, I'll do it! I'll go to school and speak directly with the empress! I'll do it!" she announced to her parents.

Her parents were dumbfounded. When they finally spoke, it could hardly be called opposition.

"Wait. I don't think you can manage that."

"That is a prestigious school, so I hear its entrance exam is very difficult. There is no way you can get in."

But Nozomi's confusion had spread from her cerebral cortex to her brain stem and she was no longer thinking about anything besides speaking with Soga Keena.

"That's not a problem! I can use this!"

She held out a help wanted ad displayed on a mana screen.

"They're recruiting a janitor?"

"The hospitality I have gained at our inn should work just as well at a school or a train station platform! Being a janitor will be easy!" she confidently declared.

However, her parents calmly pointed out her true nature.

"Hospitality? Have you ever actually done any real work at the inn?"

"In fact, you never even clean up your own room."

"That's because we don't have any guests!" she shouted back.

She knew her parents would have no answer to that.

Her parents did indeed fall silent, so she smiled triumphantly.

"You two can just wait here. I'll make sure to revive the inn! I'll bring us

out of this situation where it's just the three of us plus L'Isle-Adam servants! If I can speak with the empress, I can do it!"

With that, she left the house.

When Nozomi finally arrived at Constant Magic Academy's janitor examination, she found a long line of people. Being a janitor at a prestigious school was a position that gave one a direct connection to the school administration and the opportunity to create useful connections with future and current priests.

As Nozomi took her spot in the back of the line, she could not help but feel nervous.

—I might be in trouble. Even if I'm a professional, my ability might not be enough to outdo all of these people at once.

It was unclear where this strange confidence of hers came from, but she looked down on the others there.

The examination included an interview and occupation aptitude diagnosis by an artificial spirit known as Yatagarasu. By referencing a database with records of every action someone had made, that person's optimal occupation could be computed. It looked like fortune telling at first, but the conclusion was based on the person's actions, thought patterns, and physical ability, so it was never wrong. The one exception was Soga Keena. She had been diagnosed as a nurse but had become empress. However, some said empress was not an occupation, so it was still considered almost perfectly accurate in predicting everything from "system engineer" to "demon king". There were of course people who

took on a different occupation if they had a good reason such as continuing the family business, but that rarely turned out well.

Using this aptitude diagnosis to find a new employee was considered to be quite fair. If the school chose someone diagnosed as a butler or educator, the person was guaranteed to do a good job. Those taking the examination were aware of this, but a lot of them were taking part despite knowing their optimal occupation. It was not unusual for someone ideal to not show up and so someone from a similar occupation would be chosen.

Nozomi had never undergone an aptitude diagnosis before, so she nervously approached the three-legged crow.

Once her diagnosis was complete, Yatagarasu shouted out in its unique high-pitched voice.

"Janitor!"

This surprised the administrators running the examination.

"Ehh!? Someone like that is one in ten thousand!"

A janitor was simply someone who maintained the school, so it was not exactly a profession. Someone for whom that was "optimal" was rare. In fact, that was why they had been searching for someone like this.

"Amazing..."

“There’s really someone like that?”

The other examinees began muttering amongst themselves when they heard Nozomi’s result. Their voices were filled with a mixture of envy and disappointment. They had all been diagnosed as university professors, priests, or other prestigious jobs, but their dreams had been crushed not long after getting up from that seat. They had come here seeking connections, yet a natural born janitor had appeared before them. None of them knew what to say.

But Nozomi simply interpreted it as a compliment.

—I can do this! I can! Ancestors, are you watching? I’ve never shined brighter!

Her eyes glittered with excitement.

And thus a new janitor was born.

Her name was Sasahara Nozomi.

This was the job she had been born to do.

Chapter 1: The Janitor's Frightening Trap!

After becoming empress, Soga Keena was supposed to quietly perform her imperial duties, but she would occasionally...no, constantly run off and cause trouble for those around her.

"My only real duties are praying and signing things. Doing that boring stuff for so long is hard work."

Keena was sitting on Akuto's bed and talking on and on. She had torn Akuto's blanket from him and wrapped it around herself, she had her beloved rice cooker in front of her, and she was scooping white rice into her mouth using a wooden spoon.

Akuto sat up in bed and listened to her speak for a while, but then he checked the time.

It was currently 5:30 in the morning and he had about half an hour until he had to get up.

That meant one thing: this young empress, who had red tufts of hair on the top of her head, a round face, a stomach that acted as a black hole for white rice, and a mysterious side that occasionally showed itself, had snuck into his dorm room at dawn and begun munching on rice.

"Isn't that going to give you a stomachache?"

Akuto pointed at the rice cooker.

"Did you know that the palace only allows me two bowls of rice?"

He was unsure if that qualified as an answer or not.

"Maybe, but no other guy has to worry about a rice cooker's chime going off at five in the morning," he complained.

"It's not my fault. The imperial guards have gotten used to me, so they stop me from taking off my clothes when I try to disappear. If I don't slip away early in the morning, I can't escape."

Keena had the special ability to use invisibility magic and she would use that ability to escape.

"I'm glad the imperial guards are normal people."

Akuto yawned in his bed and Keena pouted her lips.

"A-chan, you don't get to talk about people being normal."

She had a point. It had been said that Sai Akuto would become the demon king in the future and he had already done so. He was far from normal.

But on the inside, he was a diligent person. While still wearing his pajamas, he began cleaning up the room Keena had messed up searching for the rice cooker.

"I've had enough excitement. I know I won't be able to live a normal life, so I want to remain as secluded from the world as possible. My dream of being a priest seems even further off now. Not just that. It's impossible. But I still want to live a proper life. And to do that, I need you to be a proper empress. If you take your job seriously, it might be possible to reform the political system from the inside," said Akuto while returning his scattered clothing to the closet.

Despite being a living combat machine, he had returned to a normal school life. This was thanks to the empress's ability to control the demon king. That meant he had to live his life while under Keena's control. His life was reliant on Keena, so it was natural for him to want to lecture here at times.

And it seemed his words actually reached Keena.

"You're right. I need to focus on being empress!"

After that resolute statement, she licked some rice off of the spoon, returned it to the rice cooker, and stood up.



“First, I need to reform the school! Yes, I need to make sure everyone understands how great rice is!”

With a determined look on her face, Keena vigorously clenched her fist and took the pose of a goddess standing up in revolution.

However, she was currently naked.

The blanket wrapped around her fell and exposed her rather stumpy body.

"Keena!"

Akuto closed his eyes when he noticed.

"Eh? What? ...Hyah!"

Once she looked down at her own body and finally caught on, Keena frantically picked up the blanket.

"A-chan, you perv. I'm still the same as when I disappeared."

"You did all that on your own. I need to get you some clothes."

He started to leave the room, but someone called out to stop him.

"That will not be necessary."

A shelf near the ceiling opened and a girl with doll-like beauty appeared from within. She skillfully bent her body to slip out of the thin shelf door. Despite falling from higher than the average adult's height, she rotated her body like a cat and splendidly landed in the center of the room.

She could make these inhuman actions because she was an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam. She was Akuto and Keena's observer and her name was Korone.

"I am one of the empress's maids, after all. Now, here are your clothes."

Korone stuck a hand into the bag hanging from her shoulder and she pulled out a school uniform. It was a small bag, but most anything could fit inside because the interior was a virtual alternate dimension.

"Yay! Thanks."

Keena cheerfully took the clothes. Korone immediately circled behind Akuto and covered his eyes with her hands.

"I wasn't going to try to watch her change."

"But a teenage boy's desire for female nudity is quite powerful. It is enough to drive you to bike through the night to reach a vending machine the next town over."

"I don't have that much willpower," argued Akuto.

But Korone silently continued to cover his eyes.

After changing into the uniform, Keena made an announcement.

"As empress, I will start by reforming the school. I will reform it with the power of rice. By reminding everyone of the forgotten appeal of rice, I will change the students' state of mind! I call it the Rice Renaissance! I will bring back the mindset of the ancient empire that loved rice so that our youths can grow up healthy! And I will ultimately change all of the

empire's land into a giant rice field!"

"That's crazy," said Akuto, but Korone drowned him out with applause.

"What a wonderful idea! Long live the empress!"

"Y'know..."

Akuto turned toward Korone, but her expressionless look made it impossible to tell what she was thinking. Even so, she started egging Korone on.

"I, Korone, shall do whatever I can to aid your majesty. All glory to the empress!"

"No, Korone-chan. All glory should go to rice!" said Keena while almost looking like a saint.

"Seriously...?" complained Akuto.

Keena's statements had been so ridiculous that he had thought her ideas would never be carried out.

But Keena's Rice Renaissance began as soon as midday.

The dining hall was always crowded during the lunch break, but it was

even busier than usual today.

The line of students stretched outside of the dining hall and showed no sign of moving. The problem existed at the front of the line.

"Spaghetti and meat sauce please."

The person at the front was Etou Fujiko. She used her supple and slender fingers to elegantly place her meal ticket on the counter.

She had the elegance of a refined, black-haired girl. She was so popular among the girls that they practically idolized her. However, she had an outer and inner personality. Deep down, she was truly a bad person. She worshiped Akuto from the bottom of her heart. She did not hide that, but the other girls thought she had been brainwashed by the demon king.

"We have no spaghetti."

Fujiko looked over the counter in shock.

She had recognized the voice.

Korone was standing behind the dining hall counter.

"What are you doing, Korone? And what do you mean you do not have spaghetti?"

"On the empress's orders, I am in charge of the dining hall today," explained Korone with an emotionless voice. "As for the spaghetti, I apologize, but we do not have what we do not have. You can use the same meal ticket, but please change your order."

"I suppose I have no choice. Udon would be nice. I will have a kitsune udon," said Fujiko with a kind smile.

"We do not have any," replied Korone immediately.

"What? You do not have udon either?" asked Fujiko in surprise.

"Correct. Please give your order."

Fujiko now understood why the line was so long, but she could not comprehend anything beyond that. With a doubtful look, she changed her order once more.

"Tempura soba would be fine."

"We do not have any."

The response was immediate once more.

"Ramen."

"None of that either."

"Yakisoba?"

"My apologies."

"Kishimen?"

"Of course not."

"Fine, hiyashi chuuka!"

"Why would we have that?"

"I am in the mood for noodles today! Surely you have some kind of noodle!"

Fujiko raised her voice, but Korone's voice was as calm as ever.

"Noodles? We do have rice noodles."

"What? Rice noodles?"

"Yes. Even that was a compromise."

At that point, Fujiko realized what was happening.

"That's right. Soga Keena is now the empress."

"Precisely. She wishes to convey the wonders of rice, so we are serving a menu of nothing but rice. Meal K is recommended."

"Meal K..." fearfully muttered Fujiko.

Meal K was a frightening meal put together specifically for Keena. Even the fried foods and the soup used rice, so no normal person could finish eating it. The main side dish was rice croquettes.

"So that is what caused this disaster."

Fujiko looked around. The line was so long because the others had argued just as Fujiko had. Some students had received food and sat down, but they had all stopped eating with looks of despair covering their faces. A close inspection showed all of them had Meal K sitting in front of them.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Fujiko in a low voice.

She gave the most frightening expression she allowed herself in front of the other students.

But Korone's expression did not change.

"I was ordered to spread rice around."

"I do not understand any of this, but I demand the menu be changed back!"

Fujiko's loud announcement received agreement from the students lined up behind her. They had remained silent so far, but Fujiko led them to shout in agreement.

"That's right, that's right!"

"This is imperial tyranny!"

"Give us bread! Give us noodles!"

The students broke the line and began pressing in against the counter.

"The students want noodles? Let them eat rice."

Korone stood before the rioting students, boldly folded her arms, and made that announcement.

This only made the students more furious.

"What!?"

"Just because you're cute doesn't mean you get to act like an empress!"

"It may be Korone-chan saying it, but she has a real empress backing

her.”

“At any rate, just return the menu to normal!”

The dining hall was not exactly small, but one had to vacate their seat as soon as they finished eating on a normal day. The students soon began to fill every inch around the counter.

And amid it all, Korone responded calmly...or rather, expressionlessly.

“You leave me no choice. Let us negotiate. I will add curry rice to the menu.”

Korone’s concession caused the students’ emotions to explode.

“You mean curry was off limits before!?”

“So was Meal K and white rice really all that was on the menu?”

“Screw that! We’re not going to negotiate! Either give us the full menu or it’s war!”

“That’s right! We want normal food!”

“This is our rice riot!”

The students’ expressions had grown violent. The academy had been

filled with belligerent students from the beginning, but none of them would lose their cool easily. Nevertheless, a full-blown riot was breaking out. Grudges over food were frightening.

"I have a feeling this is not quite the same as a rice riot, but I must interpret your statements as threats of violence against me," said Korone.

The students' expressions grew nervous and a stir spread through them like a wave.

Would they do it or not? That dangerous atmosphere filled the dining hall. Everyone there was well aware of Korone's combat ability, but the crowd was too hungry and enraged to leave their combat stances.

"We demand food! Return the menu!"

"We are not afraid to fight!"

"Isn't that right, Etou-san?"

The students right in front of the counter sought agreement from Fujiko who had started this riot.

But she had vanished from the front of the line.

"Huh?"

The students in front of the counter found it odd that Fujiko was missing after stirring up the riot, but they did not have time to think on it.

The next thing they knew, a dangerous voice came from behind Korone.

"What's going on out there?"

It was a casual question. In other words, it was not the words or the voice that were dangerous. It was Sai Akuto who poked his head out that was dangerous.

The students all moved away from the counter.

"N-no fair! You can't use someone that dangerous in your negotiations!"

"You're trying to threaten us, aren't you!?"

"Let's keep this peaceful! Let's drink some tea and calmly discuss it!"

All of them began speaking fearfully. This was not surprising. This was the person who had fought in a great battle which had brought great disaster to the imperial capital. The current empress had sided with him, so he had not been blamed, but he was still the demon king.

"K-Korone-chan, why is the demon king there?" asked the student in the lead with a trembling voice.

"He is helping," answered Korone.

She was not lying. Akuto was cooking rice in a large pot and dividing it into rice bowls.

But the students did not interpret her words so simply.

"H-helping!?"

"The demon king would never help cook. He must be a bodyguard!"

Akuto's expression stiffened when he heard that.

—I'm actually a pretty good cook.

But despite thinking that, he did not say it out loud. And that resulted in frightening the students further.

"H-he's mad!"

"He's ready to fight!"

"Eeeee! How frightening!"

Something could be heard collapsing within the crowd. It seemed someone had fainted.

—Is it just me or has this gotten even worse than before?

Akuto was inwardly confused, but he more or less grasped the situation. He turned to Korone with an even harsher expression.

“Korone, care to explain this?”

Korone answered without changing her expression in the slightest.

“I tried feeding them rice and they rioted.”

It was a simple explanation.

Akuto brought a hand to his forehead.

“Did you not do what I told you to do? Even if you’re going to feed them rice, there’s a better way to do it. What are you going to do now? You’ve clearly failed here.”

Despite his scolding, Korone’s expression remained unchanged, but the students could not remain calm.

They had interpreted his words differently.

“She didn’t do what he told her to? I see. So this was all on the demon king’s instructions!”

“He was trying to make us eat only rice so we’d be vitamin deficient and get beriberi!”

“What a terrifying plan!”

“And he even used the empress’s love of rice! He was trying to place the blame on the empress!”

“That’s right! Keena-chan and our cute Korone-chan would never do something like this!”

“He used them and now he’s rebuking Korone-chan for the failure of his own plan!”

—I don’t entirely understand, but why does this always have to happen?

Akuto despaired in his heart.

But he still gathered his strength and faced the students.

“Well, let’s set aside that pile of misunderstandings. How about we sit down and talk about this?”

He smiled.

The smile may not have been the best, but he had a beautiful yet villainous face. When he smiled asked them to talk, it brought only fear to those before him.

Screams filled the dining hall and students rushed for the exit.

—Ah...

By the time Akuto realized his error, the dining hall was deserted.

The only motion in the empty space was the fallen meal tickets blowing in the wind.

"It appears the problem has been resolved," said Korone calmly.

"Y'know, this was definitely caused by you changing the menu to nothing but rice," complained Akuto after checking the menu and realizing what had happened.

"I was following my orders from the empress."

"She only told you to try to get them to eat more rice."

"Yes, but I decided to take a more forceful route."

"More forceful?" asked Akuto.

"Very forceful," said Korone with a nod.

"Doesn't that make this your fault?"

"You could look at it that way."

"You started a riot for no reason, didn't you?"

"Some might say so."

"You were enjoying it, weren't you?"

"A bit."

".....Eh?"

"A bit," repeated Korone.

Akuto cleared his throat a bit.

"Ahem... I-I see."

"Do not worry. A bit means that was not the only reason. You could even interpret it to mean I meant no harm and merely enjoyed what accidentally happened," she said with a serious expression.

"You don't have to explain it."

"Really? Then I will excuse myself as I clean up. I will call in the empress and have her announce that foods other than rice will be made available. Fortunately, the students have mistakenly concluded that this was the demon king's doing."

Korone bowed, but her comment made it seem like she had predicted all of this.

"Did you know it would turn out this way from the beginning?"

"You could say that," she said without turning around.

—Well, it isn't too surprising. And I'm all for using my position to improve Keena's popularity as empress.

Akuto accepted it that way, but he could not suppress the increased desire to start living a reclusive life of doing nothing but read all day.

The new janitor named Sasahara Nozomi walked through Constant Magic Academy's schoolyard. She was free to choose her own clothing but had been told to wear something she could get dirty, so she wore the maid uniform she used as a uniform at home. She was poor, so that was her only option.

Her first job was to inspect the sensors on the school buildings. If one

was broken, the manufacturer would repair it, but the janitor was the one to check them daily.

She finished the job quickly. Either her run-down home had finally come in handy or she was showing off her skill as a natural born janitor because she completed the job with several times the skill of a normal person. She was currently on her way to the final inspection.

That was when loud voices reached her ears.

“Long live the empress!”

Her ears twitched and light reflected off her exposed forehead.

“The empress?”

She ran toward the voices and found Keena surrounded by cheering students. She was not aware of this, but these cheers were for returning the dining hall to normal.

—That’s her!

Her eyes were fixed on Keena. She had not noticed on the broadcast, but Keena’s face was quite foolish-looking in addition to looking like a commoner.

—Wh-why does she look so foolish?

Nozomi's eyes began to spin around and her thoughts fell into chaos.

—An idiot like that can become empress?

—Is bloodline really all that matters?

—That means I can become empress too!

—But there already is an empress.

She finally reached an incorrect conclusion.

"I know! I can talk with her and have her give me the position of empress!"

She had arrived at the school with no plan, so it was only natural that she came up with a reckless answer. However, she turned back toward Keena while convinced that her idea was brilliant.

—Now, how can I get a chance to talk with her?

Keena was surrounded by students, so she could never get close.

—I need to wait for a good opportunity.

She hid behind a cleaning supplies locker at the back of the school building.

Finally, the students started back toward the newly freed dining hall. Only Keena and Korone remained and they began walking while discussing something.

—Th-they're coming this way!

Nozomi felt her pulse quicken as the two girls approached.

—Th-this is no time to be nervous. O-oh, no...

Despite what she told herself, she was nervous.

She had always been timid.

—E-ee! H-here they come!

The two girls were almost to her now.

"I had the new palace's yard made into a rice paddy."

"I figured you would do that."

"Eh!? How did you know?"

She could hear their conversation now.

—Okay, let's do this.

—No, once they're a little closer.

—Okay, now.

—No, maybe it would be better to start from behind after they pass by.

She hesitated.

And unsurprisingly, Keena and Korone passed by right in front of her while she hesitated.

By the time she made up her mind and jumped out, they were long gone.

—Wh-why? How?

In her confusion, her eyes started spinning around again and her thoughts started in an incorrect direction. To make a long story short, she ultimately reached a completely wrong conclusion.

—My only option is to set a trap to stop her and talk to her!

She decided to use her special authority as janitor to check on Keena's daily schedule, so she quickly finished her work and then checked the

class schedule using the shared terminal in the janitorial room.

“According to the empress’s class schedule, she’ll move between classes here!”

She knew where to set her trap: the path between classes.

—What kind of trap should I use? Should I put birdlime on the ground? No, birdlime is hard to use and it would stick to other people as they passed by. But I want to use birdlime in the end. Then I need to put it somewhere other people won’t go. I know! I can put it on the wall. Real high up on the wall. Up where even someone with flight magic wouldn’t normally go. That means I need something to lead her up there.

Her thoughts had reached a point that it was needless to mention that they were wrong.

Ultimately, her plan was as follows:

She would place banana peel on the path Keena would walk down. Keena would slip and face upwards. A flyer for a sale on rice would be placed up above. When she walked in the direction indicated by the flyer, she would reach an empty passageway. A bag of rice would be placed on the ground there. When she grabbed it, a metal washtub would fall from above. It would hit her head and make her stagger to the side where she would fall on a trampoline. The trampoline would send her flying upwards where she would stick to the birdlime placed high on the wall.

—And I’ll be waiting at the window next to her where I can casually talk

to her. It's perfect! Simply perfect! I'm so brilliant it scares me!

It certainly took a type of brilliance to think that would work. At any rate, Nozomi began setting up the trap. After doing so, she waited for Keena to arrive. According to the schedule, Keena would travel alone after the other classmates had passed by.

After watching Keena's classmates walk by while excitedly talking, Nozomi placed a banana peel in the center of the hallway and quickly hid behind a column.

"Heh heh heh. Now she'll trip."

Nozomi snickered.

But it was not Keena who appeared. It was the beautiful L'Isle-Adam who had accompanied her.

—Did she send her servant on ahead?

Nozomi gasped, but she was even more shocked when the L'Isle-Adam – Korone – walked forward and tossed the banana peel in a trashcan.

"My perfect plan..."

It was unclear what about the plan was perfect, but Nozomi seemed to turn to white ashes.

Just as she was about to collapse, a voice suddenly called out to her.

"Excuse me."

".....Eh?"

She came back to her senses and looked over. To her surprise, Korone's face was directly in front of her.

"Hyaaah!"

She tried to run away, but Korone calmly grabbed her arm.

"Please wait."

"Eeee! Forgive me! Show mercy! I only did it on a whim!"

"What are you talking about? I only called out to you because you were staring off into the distance."

"Eh? Then you don't know I set a trap?"

"A trap? You set a trap?"

"Oh, no! How did you find out!?"

Completely forgetting that Korone held her arm, Nozomi tried to run away, but that was of course impossible. She merely tugged on her arm and fell forward.



"Are you perhaps an idiot?" expressionlessly asked Korone.

"Uuh... I don't want to be called an idiot...but I was a huge idiot just now."

She readily gave in, fell to her knees, and began to sob.

"Crying will not help. Now, confess your crimes. What is this trap? Why did you set it?"

Korone looked down at her as she asked these questions.

Nozomi wiped away the tears and began to honestly confess what she had done. She confessed that she had set up birdlime in order to capture the empress, that she had wanted to speak with the empress, and that she had imperial blood.

"I see. So that is why you set up this ridiculous trap."

"That's right. But I wasn't trying to hurt her."

"I cannot believe you tried to capture her with this trap."

"I said I was sorry. I really am."

"Yes. It was quite naïve to think this trap would work."

"Eh?"

Nozomi looked up.

Korone nodded expressionlessly.

"You cannot take the empress's place with this trap. You need to think

more realistically.”

“Eh? Eh? Eh? What?”

Korone went on to teach Nozomi her mistake.

“Think about it. You will not become empress if you merely capture her and speak with her.”

“Y-you’re right. Capturing her and speaking with her isn’t enough...”

“Yes. A peaceful talk will accomplish nothing.”

“Eh?”

“In a negotiation, you must find a way to get your opponent to accept your terms. In other words, your odds of success are much higher if you negotiate with them while they are in some type of predicament,” calmly explained Korone.

“W-wait. Then...”

Noticing something was odd, Nozomi hesitantly spoke up, but the look on Korone’s face remained perfectly serious. In fact, her expression did not change in the slightest. Even so, Nozomi understood what it was Korone was saying.

"You mean I should threaten her?"

Korone shook her head.

"Of course not. It is a negotiation. Some may view it as a threat, though."

"I can't! I can't do that! I just can't! ...But just for reference, how exactly would I threa-negotiate with her?"

Nozomi squeezed her eyes shut while firmly grabbing Korone's hand.

"First, you must make the trap something harmless. However, you still must have room for negotiation. In other words, you should corner her mentally," said Korone.

Nozomi appeared to be thinking and she finally clapped her hands together.

"So for example, I could make her naked in front of everyone if she was caught by the trap?"

"That would be one method," agreed Korone.

"Ahh! Thanks! You're really nice!"

Nozomi thanked her while crying. She let go of Korone's hand to begin

working on the trap, but she quickly realized she did not know what to do.

“Um, what should I do for a trap?”

“I see. Allow me to give you some advice. With you, something complex would be a bad idea. The simpler, the better. You should follow two general rules: it should not use mana and it should accomplish its goal in a single step,” calmly explained Korone. “It should not use mana because that will delay the detection of the trap by the students who are skilled at magic. And it should accomplish its goal in a single step because more quickly shaming them will obstruct the mental focus needed to use magic and lengthen the span of the shaming.”

“I see. This is very useful.”

Nozomi began taking notes.

“In that case, there are only a few effective types of traps. Here are the diagrams.”

Korone opened a mana screen and displayed detailed information on the traps.

“Why do you have this stuff saved?”

Korone pointed at the screen without answering Nozomi’s question.

"The trick here is this rope. It activates once the rope is pulled."

"I see, I see."

Nozomi was easily convinced and she began nodding.

"A trap that catches their feet in a rope and hangs them upside down is effective, but it is dangerous and should be avoided. I suggest dumping a special chemical on their head."

"A chemical?"

"Use this."

Korone pulled a bottle from the bag she carried and held it above her head.

"Clothmeltium!"

"Cl-cloth-what?"

"Clothmeltium. This frightening potion melts only clothing."

"That's a very straightforward name."

"Blame the one who named it. It uses bacteria to melt the synthetic fibers."

"So it'll leave them in their underwear right away! Or naked if their underwear has synthetic fibers!"

"Exactly."

Korone nodded and held the bottle out toward Nozomi.

"Dilute it thirty times before using it. This bottle is enough for three buckets' worth."

"B-but..." Nozomi hesitated. "Isn't this going a bit too far?"

"Is it? You are merely making her naked to negotiate with her. I fail to see the problem."

Korone tried to force the bottle into her hands.

"Th-there isn't a problem, but...um... E-eeee!"

Nozomi cowered down.

She had always been timid, so she naturally grew afraid when someone talked about this plan so excitedly. In her eyes, Korone looked like Mephistopheles. She was quite the expressionless demon.

The small girl's trembling fingers reached for the bottle.

And then...

"Korone, who is that?"

A male voice suddenly approached.

"Hyaaaaah!"

Nozomi screamed and ran away.

"Wait..."

The boy, Akuto, spoke up in confusion, but Nozomi did not hear him. She ran around in complete confusion and finally settled down behind a thicket somewhere. She caught her breath and realized she held the bottle in her hands.

"I-I have it."

She gulped.

And...

"Ah, why is there a copy of the design on my terminal mana screen!?"

"Korone, who was that?"

Akuto tilted his head as he watched Nozomi run away.

"The janitor," said Korone casually.

"Then why was she dressed like a maid? No, that isn't the issue. What were you two doing?"

"She appeared to be a pitiful person with strange delusions, so I was speaking with her."

"What?"

Akuto tilted his head again.

"She was trying to capture the empress with a bizarre trap. She planned to leave this banana peel here."

Korone returned the banana peel to its original spot.

"I don't follow."

"You don't? That simply shows how bizarre the situation was. The empress was safe because she was skipping her class, but I was trying to determine what that janitor had done and possibly arrest her. However,

you showed up and let her escape," declared Korone.

Akuto was troubled.

"You mean it was my fault?"

"I did not say that."

"But if you were trying to capture her..."

"She had not committed enough of a crime to be arrested, so I was technically setting things up for that."

"I still don't understand. You weren't making the situation more complicated just for the fun of it, were you?"

"A bit."

"You can't do that."

"Do not worry. I was 80% serious."

"Y'know..."

Akuto gave up on that confusing conversation and decided to pursue the maid janitor. He left Korone behind and jogged in the direction Nozomi had disappeared in.

—Um, I think she went this way.

He travelled to the side of the school building and found Nozomi in a narrow passageway students would travel along between classes.

The short janitor in a maid uniform was in the middle of setting up a primitive trap.

She was leaning over in a thicket to the side and rummaging around with some rope.

"Excuse me," he called out.

He received a scream in response.

"Hyaaaah!"

And in the next instant, Nozomi was already running away.

"Wait!"

He tried to stop her, but she disappeared around the corner of the building in no time.

He tried to pursue her but stopped once he noticed Nozomi's trap at his feet.

—That was close. This must be the trap Korone mentioned.

He had only noticed because he had looked down where she had been working, but a narrow piece of fishing line was stretched across at his feet. If he had walked normally, he would have tripped it. And a bucket was set up to dump a liquid on him if he did. The bucket was cleverly hidden behind a tree branch, so no one would notice it if they were not looking for it.

“I need to get that out of the way first.”

He followed the fishing line, found the contraption hidden on the tree trunk, and thought about how to dismantle the trap without causing the bucket to fall.

—If I remove this rope, the bucket will fall, so maybe I should just let it happen while no one is here.

He then started to remove the contraption created from a branch and a stone weight.

“What are you doing over there?”

But then he heard a voice.

“Wah! Don’t move!” he frantically shouted.

Hattori Junko had arrived. The girl was the class representative and had a deep connection with Akuto. She had a dignified presence, a straightforward personality, and popularity with her comrades, but Akuto alone knew she could actually be quite careless.

And he had a bad feeling about what it meant that someone as careless as her was here.

"What do you mean 'don't move'? What are you hiding over there!?"

Junko began walking over with long strides.

"I said stop!"

He tried to stop her, but she only lengthened her strides.

"You are acting quite suspicious! What are you...ah!"

Her foot had hit the fishing line.

"Ah!"

Akuto frantically tried to grab the rope supporting the bucket, but the impact of Junko's foot had caused the stone weight to fall more quickly than expected. The rope slipped straight through his fingers.

"Wah!"

She almost tripped, but just barely managed to keep her balance.

But that had been a mistake.

The bucket's contents splashed over her entire body.

"Bh...! What is this!?"

As she looked up and shook her head to throw the moisture from her hair, Akuto walked over.

"Um, well..."

He waved his hands back and forth.

She did not know what that meant, so she walked forward.

"Do not try to trick me! Why would you pull this childish prank?"

In her anger, she pointed at Akuto. However, the sleeve covering that outstretched arm was falling to pieces.

"Wh-what is... Ehhhhhh!?"

Her eyes opened wide in surprise and her entire uniform began to fall

from her body.



"Eeee!"

She covered herself with her arms and crouched down. Fortunately, she wore cloth bandages and a loincloth for underwear, so they did not melt away.

"A-are you okay?"

He hurried over to her, removed his jacket, and placed it over her.

She pulled the jacket tightly around herself and glared sharply up at him with tears in her eyes.

"H-how dare you. I thought it was just a childish prank, but this is truly cruel. Did you really go to so much trouble just to remove my clothes?"

"No, I wasn't trying to remove your clothes."

"I see. So the trap was meant to remove the clothes of whoever walked by. I-if you had wanted to see me naked, I could have forgiven you, but..."

She bit her lips and stood up. She put her arms through the jacket's sleeves to cover her body and gathered mana light in her hand.

"Wait a second! That isn't it either."

"I do not believe you. You felt like pulling a prank on the normal students now that your power is sealed, didn't you!?"

"No, that isn't it."

"Fortunately, I can punish you as you are now. And I know it takes a lot to kill you."

She approached him with a fierce look.

The normal students were mistaken due to their limited knowledge of the situation, but he did not have the ridiculous power he had gained after awakening. His body was sturdy, but his mana control was still imperfect. In other words, he would feel pain when punched.

"No, um..."

He slowly stepped backwards.

"Trying to run shows you have not learned your lesson! Prepare yourself!"

Junko fired a mana sphere. Akuto dodged it and fled.

"Wah!"

"Argh! Get back here!"

"If I stop, you'll hit me!"

"Of course I will!"

Junko and Akuto ran around while shouting angrily.

This commotion was noticed by Fujiko who had been the first to escape from the commotion in the dining hall. She had been in a quiet spot behind the school building eating a pasta lunch she had bought outside

the school.

"Oh? What is this commotion?"

She looked up while sitting on a bench, realized Junko was chasing Akuto around, and frantically stood up.

"Hold it! What do you think you are doing!?"

She shouted angrily and began pursuing Junko.

"You may be an upperclassman, but I will not let you stop this punishment!" shouted Junko to Fujiko.

"I do not know what happened, but you must obey Akuto-sama! That is our duty!" she shouted angrily back.

"What do you mean 'our'!? When did I become a part of your group!?"

"That is not what I meant! All of humanity must obey him!"

"Do not be ridiculous!"

The two girls shouted back and forth while continuing to run.

"Either way, please stop chasing me!"

Akuto shouted behind him, but he stopped in surprise when he looked ahead once more.

"Ah! Wait! That's dangerous!"

He had seen Nozomi running from behind something and hiding. And that meant she had prepared a trap nearby.

"Dangerous? You cannot trick me!"

Junko jumped into the air to attack him.

"Hold it!"

Fujiko ran forward to stop her.

And...

Her foot hit something and she tripped.

"Ah!"

"Eh?"

Akuto and Junko watched as Fujiko fell forward and stopped moving.

A liquid poured on her from above.

"Wait. What is this?"

She stood up and her clothes melted away. Without noticing, she struck a grand pose while in her underwear.

"Ahh..."

Akuto covered his face with a hand.

"Etou-san!"

Junko frantically waved her hand.

"Wh-what is it? ...Oh? H-hyaaaah!"

She covered herself with her arms, blushed, and looked to Akuto.

"If you wished to see me naked, you only had to ask. ...And this is hardly the time!"

Her tone of voice changed partway through and she suddenly swiped Akuto's jacket that Junko was wearing.

"W-wah Hyah! Wh-what are you doing!?"

Junko covered her body and crouched down.

"Oh ho ho ho ho! I was wondering why you were wearing Akuto-sama's jacket, but now I understand. And his jacket is wasted on you!"

She placed the jacket over her shoulders and adoringly rubbed her cheek against the collar.

"Y-you may be an upperclassman, but I cannot let you treat me like this.

Junko ground her teeth and glared at Fujiko, but she could not move from her crouched position.

"I'm not sure what to say..."

Akuto removed his shirt and placed it over Junko.

"Ah! I think I would rather have that..." muttered Fujiko as she looked down at Junko putting on and buttoning up the shirt

"D-do not be ridiculous." Junko blushed. "Who would want this sweat-stained shirt?"

"That is what makes it such a prize!"

Fujiko's eyes were sparkling.

"Um... I'll just ignore that argument," interrupted Akuto. "Anyway, you know I didn't do it now, right?"

"I did see something strange run away."

Junko looked away awkwardly.

"So you are saying someone thought up this ridiculous contraption?" asked Fujiko. She looked around and opened her eyes a bit. "Oh?"

"What is it?" asked Akuto, but he did not have to wait for an answer.

He quickly realized a large number of students were watching from a distance.

"What's this? Exhibitionism?"

"Ah, the demon king is toying with Fujiko-sama again."

"Fujiko-sama is one thing, but the class rep is only wearing a shirt."

"I can't believe they would do this at the school."

Akuto heard people muttering.

"It appears a crowd has formed. Well, I have no problem letting them see."

Fujiko seemed calm, but Junko quickly paled.

"Wah, wah, wah! Why must you humiliate me like this!?"

"I already told you it wasn't me," complained Akuto.

However, Junko was not listening due to her embarrassment.

"Shut up! This has to be your fault! Argh, I've had enough! I can think about it after I punish you!"

She finally pulled a sword from somewhere and charged toward Akuto.

"Please try to think about it now!"

As she pursued him, he had no choice but to run.

"Wait! Stop trying to attack Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko began pursuing Junko once more.

"Ah, this is just going to make it harder to find that girl," complained

Akuto.

He looked around for Nozomi as he ran and a look of shock filled his face.

"I can't let him embarrass girls like this!"

"But he's the demon king. What if you anger him?"

"He can't use his full strength right now. Let's surround him and insult him so he can't recover!"

"This is getting interesting."

"We might get to see something sexy."

"Yeah, I want to see more of the class rep in just a shirt."

"Boys, we told you to stop that!"

While loudly speaking and arguing, a large group of students began to move. Akuto was of course at the lead. Most of the students following him did not understand the situation and some were simply following the crowd.

"What the hell is going on!?" he shouted as he began searching for Nozomi all the more desperately.

—Ah! I did it without thinking again!

Nozomi held her head in her hands.

Akuto, Junko, and Fujiko were currently running after each other. Nozomi had set up the trap that stripped Fujiko without even thinking about it.

“How did this get so far out of hand?”

She regretfully fled on unsteady feet. After a bit, she noticed something odd: a rumbling noise.

“Wh-what is this?”

She looked around and noticed a distant cloud of dust.

—Wh-wh-what? No one told me all this would happen.

The cloud gradually approached. Once she realized it was a stampede of over one hundred students, she completely lost her senses in fear.

“Kyaaaaaaah!”

Her eyes rolled around in her head and she reached a mistaken and

incredible conclusion.

—I-I have no choice but to do it. No one can stop it now.

“Why must I be humiliated so!?”

“A proper lady transforms it into pleasure!”

Junko and Fujiko both shouted out.

“Either way, can you two stop chasing me? ...No, I suppose not,” complained Akuto.

The other students were pressing in from behind. If the two girls stopped, they would be overwhelmed by that surging wave.

—At any rate, I need to find that tiny maid... Ah!

In that moment, he spotted Nozomi and began moving toward her. She seemed to be on her way to the gym.

—If I grab her and have her explain the situation, I should be able to resolve this.

Nozomi had apparently entered the gym. It had multiple exits, but they were not easy to find. With any luck, he could corner her here.

"This might just work."

He charged into the gym and spotted Nozomi climbing up onto the stage at the very back of the gym.

"Hold it right there!"

He shouted toward her, but she swiftly fled to the side of the stage.

"Oh, c'mon..."

He pursued her, but Junko and Fujiko were of course approaching from behind him. And all the other students were behind them.

"Ah, I'm going to be trapped in the gym. Well, it should be fine since that girl doesn't have anywhere to escape to."

As he muttered to himself, Akuto ran up onto the stage. He looked up and spotted Nozomi standing in front of the gym's lights and curtain control panel on the second floor behind the stage.

"Ah! Hey, don't be afraid! I'm not going to hurt you!"

He called out to her, but perfect spirals had appeared in her eyes.

"Liar! You're going to capture me and do all sorts of things to me, aren't

you? Yes, I already know the truth. That's what you're going to do."

"No, it isn't!"

"If not, then what are all those people for?"

She pointed behind him.

He turned around and found the gym packed full of students.

"That just kind of happened..."

Despite Akuto's argument, Nozomi shook her head.

"Even so, it still means I can't escape! That's right. I have no choice but do this."

She reached for the control panel.

"Do what?" frantically asked Akuto.

"Hmph." Nozomi struck the control panel. "Do this!"

Behind Akuto, rain began to fall all throughout the gym. The cold rain audibly fell.

"That isn't rain. Is it the sprinklers?"

Sure enough, the sprinklers on the roof had activated. Water poured down over every inch of the gym.

"That's cold!"

"What is this?"

"Don't think you can escape."

The students began to grow louder. After all, they were crammed inside the gym.

"Water? ...It can't be!"

Akuto looked up at Nozomi in surprise.

She was in a complete state of confusion, so she shouted back.

"I told you I had no choice but to do this!"

The angry cries of the students filling the gym finally changed to screams.

"Hyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Waaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

The gym shook from both male and female screams and it began to fill with the color of flesh.

Everyone was either naked or in their underwear. In other words, they had all lost their uniforms.

The girls began using magic to knock back the boys and the boys tried to fly away to escape, but everyone simultaneously using magic in that confined space quickly used up all the surrounding mana. The students hit the walls, tripped, or fell on a nearby person and accidentally pulled off their underwear. It was a truly hellish scene.

"This is...horrible," muttered Akuto as he watched from the stage.

"Come to think of it, an old artist painted hell like this," casually commented Fujiko after escaping onto the stage.

"I understand the situation now, but what should we do about it?" asked Junko as she looked back and forth between Akuto and Nozomi.

Akuto looked up at Nozomi with a truly troubled look.

"If we explain the situation..."

Nozomi was trembling because she had nowhere to escape to. It was unclear if she was still confused or if she had come to her senses, but he saw a pitiful and frightened girl there. The way she shrank down in fear made it hard to watch.

"It looks like she won't be able to explain the situation for us," he muttered quietly.

He then hesitantly looked down. The naked boys and girls had realized it was not so embarrassing when everyone was naked, so they had stopped fighting their embarrassment and were instead glaring angrily up at the stage. The red eyes of wild beasts glowed with the dark color of flesh in the background.

"How are we supposed to settle this?" asked Junko because she had no ideas.

"Well..." The darkness of resignation filled his eyes. "We can say it was my fault."

He stepped forward.

"Wait."

Junko tried to stop him, but there was nothing she could do.

But then Fujiko cut in.

"If the two of us demonstrate our love here, no one can touch us."

"Please spare me that."

Akuto immediately rejected the idea, but he could not find any solution other than silently letting the students pummel him. He was not currently powerful enough to stop them all without injuring them.

"Well, I've made up my mind. My body is sturdy, after all."

With that light comment, he stood before the ferocious students.

They rushed for the stage with so much force it looked like they were going to jump up onto it.

Akuto showed no fear and closed his eyes as he prepared himself for the onslaught.

But then a voice filled the gym.

"Wait!"

The voice could be heard over all the angry shouts.

Everyone stopped and turned toward the voice. It came from above where Keena flew in through a window near the roof. She held a megaphone in one hand and Korone was riding on her back. With the outside light shining behind her, she looked somehow divine.

"Keena..." muttered Akuto as he opened his eyes.

The students stopped moving and began muttering.

"I apologize for this. My control was lacking," she said. "I apologize for the trouble I have caused. I will officially provide you with new uniforms."

She continued speaking without pause and the students obediently listened.

But Akuto alone noticed that she would occasionally glance toward Korone's hand. The L'Isle-Adam likely held a cue card.

"But that alone is not enough of an apology. I would like to punish the demon king here!" declared Keena loudly.

A stir ran through the students.

"Eh? Punish?"

Akuto was surprised as well. It seemed she was controlling his power, but he had heard nothing about that ability.

Keena then floated down in front of him.

And she looked up at him angrily.

"A-chan!"

"Y-yes?" he mumbled.

"A-chan! The rice got all hard because of you!" she rebuked while pointing at him.

"Eh? Rice? Hard?"

He was confused and she called Korone over.

Korone approached and pulled a giant plastic bucket from her bag. It was the type of bucket that could be used as a trash can.

"There was extra rice being cooked in the dining hall. At this rate, it will need to be thrown out," explained Korone expressionlessly.

"It's because you cooked so much, A-chan! It's dried out and gotten hard, but you have to eat it all as punishment!"

Keena opened the bucket's lid and it was full of dry rice.

"Eh? Wait..."

Even Akuto backed away at that.

When Korone stuck a wooden spoon in the rice, it made a crunching noise.

"It's dry!" cried Akuto.

"I already told you it is! Now, eat all of it so it doesn't go to waste!"

Keena took the spoon from Korone, held down Akuto, and began stuffing hard rice in his mouth.

"S-stop...mgh! It's hard... My teeth!"

"Don't worry! You can eat it if you try! If I work really hard, I can eat this much! So if you put up with how hard it is, it won't be a problem!"

Despite how ridiculous her demand was, Keena climbed on top of Akuto and continued stuffing rice in his mouth.

"He has to eat hard rice?"

"Without recooking it?"

"And that much of it?"

"This has just gotten silly."

"Yeah, let's get out of here."

This pacified the angry students. As they watched on in a daze, Akuto was forced to swallow the dried rice.

Meanwhile, Korone stepped forward and opened her bag.

"Please form a line. Tell me your size and type and I will provide a replacement uniform."

The students obediently formed a line.

And thus, the commotion came to an end with only one major sacrifice.

All alone now, Akuto lay on his bed. Not even he was sure how he managed to consume all that rice, but the entire contents of the giant bucket had vanished into his stomach. He was now suffering a horrible stomachache in exchange.

"Ahh... This is nowhere near a peaceful life..." he lamented while staring up at the ceiling.

A face suddenly appeared in the edge of his vision. It was looking down at him as he lay on the bed.

"What is it?" he asked.

He received an immediate and unclear answer from Korone.

"I was just wondering if you were mad."

"Mad?" he asked.

For once, she paused before responding.

"You must know who brought about this situation. Even if some unexpected coincidences were involved."

"Yeah..." he spat out while shaking his head. "This is that girl's fault. And whether I'm mad or not is another issue. I am lamenting, though."

"In that case, I wish to make amends."

"Make amends?"

"Yes. I thought I would comfort you."

"You aren't teasing me again, are you?"

"Do you not trust me?"

She was expressionless, but there was a horribly sad ring to her voice.

"Th-that isn't what I said."

He grew a bit flustered.

"Good."

She smiled kindly at him. If his memory was accurate, this was the second time he had seen her smile.

She then leaned over him.

"You said you weren't teasing me, so don't try to do anything indecent," he said hesitantly.

"Do not worry. I am merely doing what I think you would want me to do. I simply wish to comfort you. Fortunately, I was given an appearance that is pleasing to humans, so I thought I would lie next to you and sing a love song."

She slipped into his bed and into his arms.

"...Hey."

"You won't let me do this?"



She looked up at him with upturned eyes.

Seeing her eyes shine like precious jewels, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders without thinking.

"Um...I...didn't say that..."

"Do you have an erection?"

"Eh?"

"I asked if you have an erection."

Akuto looked back at her face.

She was staring at him with her usual expressionless look.

"You tricked me again, didn't you?"

The corner of Korone's mouth rose in a grin.

"I should tell the other girls that they need to deceive you like this. Now, time to check if you have an erection."

"Don't!" he shouted while brushing away her outstretched hand.

While still lying next to him, she spoke in her usual tone of voice.

"Would you really not be angry if I did something like this again?"

Akuto looked her in the eye, saw she did not seem to be putting on an odd act this time, and sighed in resignation.

"As long as no one is harmed and you make sure it helps Keena. But please keep it to a minimum."

"As you wish," she agreed.

"Okay then."

He closed his eyes.

"Um..."

"Hm?"

He opened his eyes when she spoke again.

"I notice you did not force me out of the bed," she said teasingly.

"I just wanted to get to sleep because my stomach hurts!"

"I will include in my records that boys use that excuse. Now, you will be forced to eat more dried rice if the empress sees us like this, so I will return to my shelf."

She got up from the bed.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Keena since that."

"She said she would return the bucket to the dining hall. I wonder what happened."

“Waaaahh! It’s all sticky and I can’t get out! Help me, A-chan, Korone-chan!”

Keena shouted while stuck to the birdlime on the wall of the school building’s second floor.

“I was only trying to go to the rice sale I learned about when I slipped on a banana peel, but when I picked up the bag of rice, a metal washtub fell on me, I staggered over onto a trampoline, and was launched up here where I stuck!”

She was crying.

But Nozomi, the one who had laid the trap, was currently trembling inside a futon in the janitorial room.

“This is dangerous! This academy is dangerous!”

In the end, Keena was not rescued until about an hour later.

Chapter 2: What if We Made a Copy Human?

A dark room was filled with strange devices. It contained glowing panels and monitors displaying graphs. The sound of cooling fans never ceased.

In the center of that room, a girl was operating an electric screwdriver attached to the end of a mechanical arm. She seemed indifferent about her appearance because she wore plain white clothes and her short hair was unkempt. She had goggles on her forehead and oil stains on her cheeks.

Her name was Kita Yoshie. Her talent in virtual alternate dimension research had dragged her into a conspiracy which had ultimately put her on Akuto's side of the demon king war. She was now working for the government once more, but she spent most of her time lost in her own interests and inventions. Even on weekdays, she could be found working in this storehouse rented from Constant Magic Academy.

"Heh heh heh. I've finally finished it."

She looked up with a grin.

A doll lay before her.

The "doll" was a L'Isle-Adam with top-class artificial intelligence. They were often used for simple work and often did not have humanoid appearances. This doll had a smooth surface with almost no unevenness. It looked a lot like a drawing doll or a base form that would be fleshed out later. It was lying on a large work bench.

Yoshie reached for a round switch at the center of its face where a nose would go, but she hesitated to press it.

"Mnn. Was this an invention of god or the devil? Will I regret calling this detestable existence back from the deep darkness?"

She had a way of speaking in a roundabout manner. To be blunt, she was heavily obsessed with video games.

"Boss, I see you are speaking in an embarrassing way again."

She heard a sudden voice from behind her.

A small L'Isle-Adam entered the room.

Despite what she had said to Yoshie, she spoke in a strange old-fashioned manner. And her appearance was no better: she was dressed like a samurai, her ponytail was long enough to reach her feet, and the sword on her back was twice her height.

Her name was Keisu. She had been created to seal the original demon king, but with that role complete, she spent her time helping Yoshie.

"Hm? Why are you here?"

Yoshie turned around.

"Why would you ask that? You are the one that called in a guest."

Keisu pointed behind her.

"Oh, that's right."

Yoshie picked a cleaner up from the ground, sprayed some on her hands, wiped it off with a hand towel, and used a leg to push a chair out toward the guest.

"You look busy."

Akuto walked into the room and casually slid into the chair as if meeting an old friend. Yoshie's personality was not very feminine and she enjoyed topics that had little to do with the real world, so he acted without reservation around her.

"I was busy, but I just finished."

Yoshie stood next to him and rested her elbows on the table.

"You mean that doll? Or is it a L'Isle-Adam?"

He indicated the work bench with his chin.

"It's a doll, but it's a pretty dangerous one."

She gave a proud smile.

"Dangerous? Is it illegal?"

"You can't call it illegal when no laws have been made about it," she said confidently. "In other words, it goes beyond what existing laws have made a decision on."

"But you're still sure it's dangerous?" he asked.

She nodded.

"That's why I called you. Oh, but I don't mean it might explode or go on a rampage. I wanted to get your opinion."

"My opinion?"

"Yeah. Basically, this is a doll that copies someone's personality."

She pointed her thumb at the smooth doll.

"It copies someone's personality? So it's something like necromancy?"

His eyes opened wide.

"It's not quite the same. Necromancy checks the data logs saved by the gods, but this copies the personality to a virtual alternate dimension."

Akuto leaned forward in interest.

"I see. It is true our physical bodies sometimes remained here while we were sent to a virtual alternate dimension."

"Yes. I made a robot that uses that to copy a personality. I was originally thinking about where a human's soul is."

"Since that led to making this, does it mean the soul actually exists and it can be copied?"

"Yes. It's kind of weird, but just as the gods insist, there is a way to take the human soul to another dimension and reproduce it there. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"It does sound like something I should keep in mind."

He nodded with a serious expression.

"But the real question for today is what to do with this thing."

Yoshie shrugged with a troubled look.

"What do you mean?" asked Akuto.

She walked back to the work bench and beckoned him over.

"Come over and take a look."

"It has a pretty large build."

He looked down at the doll lying there.

Yoshie placed a hand on top of it and spoke.

"Making it is good and all, but I realized that it can be misused like crazy. It looks smooth now, but it creates the outer appearance of whoever presses the button on its nose here. It covers itself in the same kind of solidified mana that Hattori-kun's copies use."

"So you would have two of the same person? That could get strange."

"Yeah, that's why I added a safety device into the copied personality. It's made to know it's a fake and to not cause any harm to people."

"I'm interested, but you should destroy it after one test given the possibility for misuse," he said while folding his arms.

Yoshie nodded.

"I had a feeling you would say that. I just wanted a push in the right

direction. Well, that and some data.”

“Some data?” he asked.

Yoshie grabbed his hand and pressed the doll’s nose with it.

“Wait!” he cried out in surprise.

With a low hum, the doll’s surface began to glow and mana condensed around it.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought I would test it on you. But don’t worry. This won’t be too big a deal.”

She clasped her hands together as she apologized.

“But...are you sure this will be okay?”

He looked worriedly down at the doll.

“Of course, of course.”

She waved her hand irresponsibly.

Meanwhile, the mana finished condensing and the light vanished.

An exact copy of Akuto now lay on the work bench.

"Wah!" he cried out in shock.



"Looking that surprised is a lot like insulting yourself," said the second Akuto as he sat up.

"That does sound like something I would say."

Akuto's eyes opened wide.

"That's because I'm made to be exactly the same," said the second Akuto. "Even though I'm aware of it, being a fake isn't the best feeling. A quick experiment is fine, but if you don't have a specific role for me, I'd like you to erase this copy as soon as possible. I don't particularly want to talk with myself."

"Agreed. Then again, I suppose it makes sense I would agree with you."

"Exactly. You just need a few minutes to gather data, right?"

Yoshie smiled as she responded to the two Akutos.

"Just chat for about an hour. But having two of the same personality together is pretty interesting."

"I don't find it interesting."

"Naturally, neither do I."

"Now, then," said Yoshie. "I would prefer if you did not simply speak with yourself."

"Yes. I would prefer to speak with you than with myself. And we haven't had many chances to have a nice conversation."

"I would like some suggestions on how to act from now on. Keena just acts too freely."

"I see you have already learned how to split up your role and speak one after the other. But remember that there's only one of me. I'm going to busy for just a one-on-one conversation.

Yoshie laughed.

"N-now this is interesting."

A black shadow lurked in the entrance to the storehouse.

It was Nozomi the natural born janitor. She wore a maid uniform around her small body and her forehead glittered as she peered into the storehouse.

She had ended up eavesdropping while performing her janitor job. She had been unable to resist looking inside and there she had witnessed the two Akutos.

"Based on the conversation beforehand, does it transform into whoever presses the button?"

She then began making strange calculations in her head once again. She did not reach too farfetched a conclusion, but her plan was plenty selfish.

"I know! I'll borrow that doll, make a copy of the empress, and have her do what I say! And then I'll become the empress. It's perfect!"

Her talent as a janitor then fully showed itself. She ran quickly over to the control panel outside the storehouse, rang the emergency alarm, and cut the power.

"Wah."

"The lights have gone out."

"This isn't right. The emergency power isn't coming on. Let's head out."

The three people inside spoke.

Hearing them, Nozomi ran back to the entrance, snatched the fire extinguisher, and sprayed it the instant the three exited.

"Wah!"

"Hyah!"

The color white filled the area and the three...no, just two let out screams.

She did not overlook that only one was unfazed.

—The doll must not have been concerned about the fire extinguisher!

After making a (for her) wonderful deduction, she grabbed the arm of the unfazed one.

"This way!"

She tugged on the doll's arm and ran.

"Ah. Are you sure?"

The doll had Akuto's personality, so it obediently followed her lead.

She then used all her ability as a janitor to keep the real Akuto and Yoshie from following. She ran down a back way while tugging on the doll Akuto's hand. In only her short time there, she had perfectly memorized the confusing structure of the school.

"Wait!"

"Where are you going!?"

Akuto and Yoshie's voices quickly grew distant behind them. There were passageways even the students were not aware of, so it was not difficult for Nozomi to escape.

"Heh heh heh. This should be far enough."

While hiding in the space behind a maintenance panel, she turned

toward the doll.

"So what do you want?"

The doll had the exact personality and appearance of Akuto, so he approached Nozomi more kindly than necessary after she dragged him here.

"W-w-well, th-the thing about that is..."

She hesitated to speak.

Unsurprisingly, she had almost no experience in speaking with boys. Having Akuto so close to her in this small space was proving too much for her.

"C-could you move a little farther away?"

"Sorry, but I think that has more to do with you bringing me into this small area. ...Excuse me a moment. This might help."

He grabbed her waist with both hands, lifted her up, and set her down on a panel just a bit higher than his chest.

"Hyaah!"

She let out a surprised shriek, but once he set her down and she found

a fair amount of space around her, she settled down. But this put his face quite nearby.

"U-u-umm..."

She blushed and shook her hands around.

But he placed a hand on her head as if being affectionate to a child.

"So will you tell me why you did that?"

"I-I... I'm not a child, y'know. I have a job!"

"My apologies. You just looked quite young. Actually, that might be rude too."

"I'm probably older than you."

She puffed out her cheeks.

"Then I apologize again. Anyway, I assume you had a good reason for doing what you did."

Akuto fixed his sitting position.

"W-well... I actually wanted to use your power to create a copy of the empress."

When she gave an honest answer, the look in his eyes changed.

"I think you know you shouldn't do that," he said seriously.

He then forcibly held down her shoulders.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

"You have to ask? Let's get back to where I should be. And..."

"Hyah! No! I'll scream."

"I would prefer to avoid misunderstandings, but if someone comes by, I just have to hand you over to them."

"Gyaaah! Noooo!"

She frantically flailed her arms and legs.

"Stop struggling so mu-Ah!"

After a quick shout, Akuto stopped moving.

Nozomi's hand had hit him directly on the nose.

"Hyaaaah! ...Oh, right. The switch."

She gave a sigh of relief once she realized Akuto had stopped moving.

"But what will happen now that I hit the switch?"

"Not good. That girl was the one from the other day."

Akuto shook his head.

"Is she trouble?" asked Yoshie.

"Yes, she is," he answered. "You probably didn't notice, but she caused a major incident the other day. The problem seems to lie in her personality. I think she has overly abundant imagination and drive, but she does not how to handle real situations."

"That does sound bad." She checked the storehouse's panel and then shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with the storehouse. This really isn't good. It means she was after the doll. She really isn't a good person."

"No. She might be planning to misuse it in some way. She seems to want to become empress, so she might try to copy Keena."

Yoshie let out a sigh when she heard that.

"Then we should be fine."

"Why?"

"It isn't that easy to misuse. While it won't harm humans, it won't necessarily obey them either. And even if she wants to use the position of empress, this is Keena we're talking about. That won't get very far."

"Hm. I guess you're right," he agreed. "And the current copy is of my personality, so nothing should happen."

"Heh heh. Don't be so sure. It looks like you still don't know how troublesome your own personality can be."

Yoshie laughed lightly and Akuto looked confused.

"Eh?"

"Just talking to myself. But there is one problem. One part is weak to impacts. If you press the switch too hard, it can cause a malfunction."

"A malfunction?"

Yoshie looked worried, but she shook her head.

"It's nothing to worry about. Normally, it will just copy whoever pressed the nose and the previous personality is erased. But when too much of an

impact is applied to the nose and it malfunctions, there is a possibility of the personalities mixing together. Outside of a truly terrible combination, that would merely create a slightly twisted personality.”

“A truly terrible combination? You mean like a personality with overly abundant imagination and drive but with an inability to handle real situations combining with a personality with a great ability to handle real situations but too much sense to act on it?”

Yoshie smiled.

“Yeah, just like that.” And then her expression froze over. “That would be the Sasahara Nozomi girl and you, wouldn’t it?”

“H-huh? If it can’t move, that means I can escape, right?”

Nozomi tried to jump down from the panel, but strength returned to Akuto’s hands holding her shoulders.

“Hyah!”

When she shouted out, Akuto looked up and smiled at her.

“You need not escape. Don’t worry. I understand now.”

“U-understand? Understand what?”

Nozomi trembled at the unusual atmosphere.

But he merely whispered gently to her.

"I will steal the imperial throne. All I need to do is seduce Keena and I will be emperor."

"Wait! You can't do that. I need to become empress!"

"My becoming emperor is just as good. After all, I will treat you well. Once I sit on the throne, you can sit by my side."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I am you," said Akuto.

Nozomi then figured out what was happening.

"So that's it! The personalities mixed together!"

"Exactly. And now that you understand, just leave it all to me."

He smiled at her again, but she shook her head.

"Y-you can't. I want to be empress..."

She insisted on resisting, but Akuto suddenly pressed his fingers against her mouth.

"Such a hopeless girl. I need you to remain silent."

"Mh...mh...mgh..."

She continued to shake her head.

Akuto grinned and slid his other hand from her shoulder to her neck. The sensation made her jump.

"Ee!"

"I will make certain you cannot resist, little kitten."

With a chuckle, Akuto moved his fingers down from her neck and brought his head in toward her.

"Wfwaaaaaaahhhh..."

She let out a scream and her entire body trembled.

"Hm? She's collapsed," said Yoshie when she found Nozomi.

"Then it did something to her?" asked Akuto in surprise. "I thought it wasn't supposed to harm people."

The two of them had found her after beginning a search.

"She's breathing."

Akuto ran over and held her up.

"She's just unconscious."

Yoshie peered at her face.

Nozomi's face was flushed and she was breathing heavily.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Akuto shook her.

"N-nnnn..."

She blinked several times and suddenly screamed when she saw him.

"Nooooo! Stop! Oh, but don't stop!"

She clung to Akuto and began panting even more heavily. It was so sudden that Akuto instinctually pulled away.

"Wait! What are you doing?"

But as if in a trance, she pursued him and pressed up against his body.

"Nyaaaaah! Have your way with meeee!"

"Waaaah! Please spare me!"

He forcibly ripped her from him and held her in one hand by the nape of the neck. Only once she was dangling down like that did she come back to her senses. Her struggling came to a sudden stop and she looked embarrassed.

"Ah... Are you the real one?"

"Yes. I am not the doll you stole. Also...what happened?"

Akuto was clearly reluctant to ask.

She blushed and shook her head.

"N-nothing happened. Y-yes, he just suddenly karate chopped me on the neck!"

As she spoke, she began fixing her disheveled maid uniform.

Akuto turned toward Yoshie with a troubled look.

Yoshie shook her head while blushing.

"Don't look at me. But...um, I think I know what happened here."

"No, I just wanted to say I wouldn't do that," he explained.

"Don't say anything to me. This is embarrassing for me as well."

Yoshie gave an embarrassed bitter smile, but her expression grew serious as she touched her goggles and turned toward Nozomi.

"Anyway, the doll escaped I assume? Please don't tell me he said he wanted to become the emperor."

A look of shock filled Nozomi's face.

"H-how did you know?"

"I knew it..."

Akuto and Nozomi exchanged a glance.

"This mixture of personalities is bad news. But he can't harm humans, so this can't be too bad, right?"

Akuto tried to stay positive, but Yoshie immediately shook her head.

"Knowing you, you probably don't have a clue, but you can get girls to do what you say by doing that to them."

Yoshie pointed at Nozomi rather than speak in any more detail.

"I can get girls to do what I say? Eh? Really?"

Akuto's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Yes...well...it depends on the girl... At the very least, it should work with a girl who doesn't hate you. Anyway, the worst part is that the doll has a girl's personality as well, so it knows the ideal way to...um...approach a girl."

Yoshie was usually quite candid, but she hesitated to speak here.

"Um, so... How should I put this? Does that give you any idea where the doll is?" asked Akuto as he let Nozomi down.

"I-I don't know! Wahhhhhhh!"

As soon as she was freed, Nozomi ran off with the speed of a frightened

animal.

"Ah, she escaped again."

Akuto scratched at his head in annoyance.

"Capturing the doll is more important," urged Yoshie.

"How do we do that?"

"Our only choice is to check with all the girls you would have the easiest time seducing."

"Seducing? What are you talking about?"

Akuto was not sure what to say and Yoshie merely sighed.

"Just follow my instructions. First, let's locate them telepathically. Um, let's start with Fujiko-kun."

She pulled out her terminal and began searching for the proper number.

Etou Fujiko was at a café managing the girls' dorm's management data, but she looked over to her student handbook when the telepathic call light flashed.

But she rejected the call just before answering it.

"Etou-san."

After all, Akuto had called out to her. The telepathic call had been from Yoshie and it was obvious who took precedence there.

"What is it, Akuto-sama?"

She smiled at him and he gave a slightly mischievous smile in return.

"I'd like to speak in private."

"Oh? It is not often that you make an invitation like that."

With her eyes sparkling, she stood up and took his hand while leaving her café cup behind.

He held her hand back and red tinged her cheeks.

"Shall we go for a walk?"

"No, I want to be alone with you."

"My! Then we can go to my underground room! What is with you all of

a sudden? I am so happy!"

She clung to his arm.

"I have something important to discuss with you," he said the instant they entered her underground room.

"Anything you wish to discuss is important to me," she said while snuggling up against his arm.

"That's good to hear. So... It seems there is a copy of me walking around."

With her still clinging to him, he sat on the velvet sofa. She leaned on his shoulder and looked up at him.

"A copy?"

"Yes. Yoshie-san created a doll that can copy a person's personality and appearance."

"My!"

Fujiko's mouth opened in surprise.

Akuto looked back at her with a serious expression.

"Anyway, it malfunctioned and is now quite dangerous. It seems to be after the imperial throne."

"The imperial throne?"

Despite repeating him, she did not seem to really be listening. She was simply looking up at him while blushing.

"Yes. It seems to want to use Keena to kill me and rule the world while using Keena as a puppet. That's why I want you to prove that I am me."

"Prove that you are you?"

She looked up at him absentmindedly.

"Yes. Please give me some kind of accessory. When I meet my copy, I can use that as a sign that I am the real one."

After saying that, Akuto traced his hand across her cheek.

A twitch ran through her back as he did.

"Ahn. In that case, how about a kiss mark? I could leave them all over. Then we would be one removed step away from using the evidence of our love to prove who is the real one. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

Fujiko brought her lips toward his neck.

"That sounds great."

She laughed and moved his hand from her cheek, to her hair, and to her head.

"And if I help, I would get a reward, wouldn't I?"

She drew back as if ticklish and brought her face in close to his.

"Of course. I was just thinking about kissing you. The rest will have to wait until after I destroy the fake."

He drew in the hand behind her head to bring her lips in closer.

But...

"Oh? What kind of a reward would that be? I said I would give a kiss to prove who is the real Akuto-sama. I am not about to kiss a fake."

She smiled cruelly and tore herself from the doll Akuto.

The doll Akuto looked confused.

"What? Why would you think I am the fake?"

"Oh? I could tell right away. It is an issue of love."

"Love?"

Fujiko crossed her arms confidently and looked down on the doll Akuto with contempt.

"Simply put, I can just tell. After all, there is something different about you. As if someone else is mixed in. You reek of the kind of ideal boy a timid girl would think up."

"Kh..."

The doll Akuto bit his lip.

"Based on what you said, I assume you truly are after the imperial throne. And if you are trying this, I can also assume you cannot harm humans just like all the other L'Isle-Adams. Am I wrong?"

She spoke with a challenge in her voice and he could only shake his head regretfully.

"That's exactly right. What are you going to do? Are you going to hand me over to the authorities?"

"Hm. That is a good question. It was quite exciting until I realized you were a fake. Perhaps I should simply forgive you."

"Eh? You'll forgive me?"

"Yes. What you are planning sounds quite enjoyable. You are trying to 'convince' girls like that until you have won over Keena, aren't you? I want to see you try that."

She laughed in amusement.

The doll Akuto was clearly confused, but she continued on.

"If any of the others cannot tell you from the real Akuto-sama, it will prove that I love him more deeply than them. And any girl who you do seduce will be awkward around him afterwards. That would be most welcome. Go seduce Hattori Junko and Soga Keena."

She then transferred Junko and Keena's numbers into a telepathic communicator that did not use magic and handed it to him.

"You do not have a registered communicator, do you? Use this. I think you will fail in the end, but do your best."

The doll Akuto accepted the communicator with a complicated expression and waved at her.

"That's where you're wrong. I'll make this work until the very end."

Left all alone, Fujiko sighed.

"I doubt it will work out, so perhaps I should have told him to give it up. It can take some doing, but there are countless ways of telling a doll from a human. Perhaps he has some reason for trying so desperately hard."

Junko was surprised to receive a telepathic call from an unregistered number. Those were fairly rare. She was doubly surprised when she answered it and it was from Akuto.

"What is it? Don't you have your own communicator?"

<It was stolen.>

"Stolen?"

<Yes. I want to meet and speak with you as soon as possible.>

"Understood. Where should I go?"

<Somewhere no one else will go. Sorry, but could you go to the mountain behind the school?>

"Understood."

After ending the call, Junko grew suspicious.

"I should probably be on my guard."

Calling her out like this was a little odd for Akuto. And then he had asked her to go to the mountain. It could easily be a trap.

She gripped her sword and approached the arranged spot while making a wide circle around the mountain area. But despite being so cautious, she did not spot any kind of trap.

"Sorry about the wait."

While still cautious, she approached Akuto.

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, things have gotten very bad."

He suddenly grabbed her right hand with both hands.

"Wha-...? Why are you holding my hand...?"

She turned her head and mumbled.

But he stared straight at her.

"Sorry. I was just worried. The thing is, a copy of me is walking around."

"A copy?"

She looked back at him in surprise.

"Yes. Kita-san created a doll that can copy people and it is trying to throw me out."

It did not look like he was lying, but something bothered her.

"So that's why your handbook was stolen. But wait..."

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's difficult to prove that I am the real one. Also, Etou-san has already fallen for the lies of the fake."

"Etou-san has?"

"Yes. She claims to love me, but she can't tell the real me from a fake. It really is horrible. You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Akuto brought his clasped hands up to his face and begged her.

"Uuh... Wait just a second."

She drew her head back a bit.

She had initially felt something off about this Akuto, but seeds of something like antagonism entered her heart when she heard that Fujiko had been deceived by the fake. If she could distinguish the real one from the fake, it would mean her feelings for him were greater.

"Don't worry. Trust me. If you see two of me and need to know which one is real, you only have to believe the one Etou-san says is fake."

He continued to press her for an answer.

"A-again... Wait a second."

She shook her head reluctantly and stepped back.

But he did not let go of her hand and stepped forward.

"Do you not like me?"

"I-I did not say that."

"You're afraid, aren't you? Don't worry. You can leave everything to me."

"I said that is not it... You are acting weird."

"Weird? Are you doubting me? In that case, I will have to prove that I am the real one."

He let go of her hand, grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and lifted her head.

"W-wait... What do you mean 'prove'?"

Even her ears blushed red and tension filled her voice.

"Only the real me can satisfy you."

He brought his face in towards hers.

"Y-you idiot... Stop..."

She brushed his fingers from her chin and lowered her head.

"You don't want to?" he whispered.

"Th-that is not the issue."

"Then you are merely afraid, little kitten. Don't worry. Just leave it to me."

He placed his hand on her head, caressed her hair, and covered her face with her hair.

"Ah..."

She felt her spine tremble and she raised her head.

"Now, be mine."

He slowly brought his face in towards her.

"Ee... I already said...um..."

She shook her head back and forth but finally closed her eyes and opened her lips slightly.

"Yes, just like that..."

And he approached those lips.

"I-I can't!"

She shoved him away.

He staggered backwards and fell to the ground.

"You don't believe me?" he asked in confusion.

She intensely shook her head.

"That is not it! It isn't... But there really is something strange about you today. You might be the fake."

"You can't mean that..."

"N-no. Do not make that face. But the boy I know would not do something like this just to get someone to trust him. That is what I mean."

She stated all that while breathing erratically as if in pain.

Akuto stood up and shook his head in disappointment.

"In that case, I understand. But it isn't easy proving that I'm the real one. I guess I have to ask another girl."

Those words brought a painful sensation to Junko's heart.

"A-another girl? Do not say it like that. It sounds like you are toying with my heart. Saying that will...um...hurt me."

"I'm aware doing that is wrong, but I'm worried I will disappear if I can't prove that I'm the real one."

"I-I understand... But can't you just ask Korone? We might have to use special equipment to tell if you are a doll, but she should be able to tell right away."

Akuto opened his eyes in surprise.

"Korone could tell? I guess you're right. I hadn't thought about that."

"As long as you understand now. Just do not say anything more about having another girl trust you."

She looked away from him.

"I will always trust in you. And I will make sure I am ready by the next time we meet alone like this..." Junko looked back at him with the eyes of a maiden. "We can continue this then. ...He's gone!?"

Akuto had already vanished, leaving only the unique thick air of the mountain.

"Wh-what is with him!? I do not care if that was the real one or not! The next time we meet, I am letting him have it!"

She stomped on the ground in anger.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but it seems the demon king is seducing girls, one after another."

"Apparently a fake has appeared and some major commotion is coming, so he wants us to join his side when that happens."

"I heard the one the empress says is real is real, so we should help that one."

"What is he trying to do? ...More importantly, has he successfully seduced any of the girls?"

"From what I hear, it's going really well. Most of them are completely falling for him."

"Does nothing else matter to a girl as long as he's strong!? And doesn't he already have Etou-san and a ton of other girls!?"

"He's apparently seducing more nonetheless. He's even won over some who already had boyfriends."

"But won't the guy attack him for that even if he's the demon king?"

"Yes. That's why he keeps seducing the girl, getting punched by the guy, and then running away."

"That's horrible. What is he trying to do?"

"Who knows. Last I heard, he was on his way to where Korone-chan and the empress are."

A stir had run through the school. Everyone knew Akuto was on a rampage and both girls and boys were either following him around or running away from him.

When he heard what was happening, Akuto gave a troubled look to Yoshie.

"What should we do?"

"Even if Nozomi's personality has messed it up quite a bit, this is still partially your own fault. You could easily seduce all these girls if you tried."

"I didn't choose to be born that way."

"Don't get mad. Anyway, where is Keena? We need to hurry up and protect her."

Yoshie sat in a chair and crossed her arms and legs. They were back in the storehouse/laboratory. They had split up to search for the doll, but that had failed, so they were back here to put together a plan.

"Can't you detect her location?" he asked.

Everyone had their own unique mana, so it was not hard to trace an individual.

"No, not without extremely high access rights. I could hack in and do it, but I don't want to risk it. This school has been under strict observation ever since the empress came here."

"Then what about Korone rather than a human? Also, she should be able to tell which one is the fake. And if we knew she was with Keena, we could stop worrying."

"It is true she would be able to detect the fake. It wasn't exactly made to hide that it's a doll."

"Well, it was an experimental model. I just wish you hadn't had it copy me."

"Yeah, about that..."

Yoshie rotated her chair 180 degrees, uncrossed her legs, spread them, placed her hands between her legs to lean forward, and grinned.

"To be honest, I had it copy your personality so I could try to seduce it while alone with it I wanted to see how it would react."

"Eh?"

Akuto was dumbfounded.

She kicked off the ground to move the chair toward him and looked up at him from below.

"It shouldn't be that surprising. Girls get embarrassed about things, you know? I thought I could practice on it rather than trying it out for real. And part of me hoped I would be satisfied with just practicing."

"You mean..."

"I wanted to try some exciting things with someone who looked just like you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he panicked.

"Wait. This is hardly the time for this. If we don't find Korone, Keena is in trouble."

"That's the problem right there. You're so attached to Soga-kun, so sometimes I think some unfair things. Like how nice it would feel to keep you all for myself."

She boldly drew his head in close and placed his forehead against hers.

"I-I didn't think you felt that way..."

There was clear confusion in his voice.

"That's because you're dense. When I talk about video games, society, or the existence of the soul, you forget I'm a girl and have a completely serious discussion with me. How could I not fall for someone like that?"

She looked into his eyes with her own shimmering eyes.

"A-again... This really isn't the time..."



"I am doing this because it is the perfect time. I actually know exactly where Korone is. She is not with Soga-kun, so Soga-kun might be in trouble."

She actually gave a cruel look for once.

"What!? Please let go. I have to go!"

"No. If Soga-kun falls for you, I'll be lonely. So can't you make me feel wonderful just for a little bit?"

"That's why you're doing this...?"

"Yes. I know it's selfish. But...I'm a girl too."

Yoshie gathered strength in the arms wrapped around Akuto's neck and stood up.

And then...

Meanwhile, Keena was in the imperial reception room that had been specially installed recently. Other than the rice bin, it was a perfectly normal room.

She had been napping there, but she opened her eyes to a sudden visitor.

"Oh, A-chan. What is it? Want to join me?"

"That might be nice, but it is hardly the time. A copy of me is after you."

He crouched down in front of Keena as she lay carelessly on the sofa.

"Hm, that's not good," she said sleepily.

"Could you take this more seriously? My copy hopes to win you over and rule using your power."

He spoke seriously, but Keena did not seem to have completely woken up.

"What do you mean by win me over?"

"He will get you to accept him and... To put it simply, he will stay by your side and use your power as empress."

"Oh, having you by my side would be nice. A-chan, stay with me forever."

She nodded blankly before embracing Akuto and pulling him onto the sofa.

"W-wait," he said embarrassedly.

"We're just going to sleep. Dozing off feels really good. And dozing off while holding someone in your arms is the best."

She nestled up against his cheek.

"This is exactly what I meant by winning you over, so stop," he said worriedly. "What if I were the fake?"

"Don't worry. I haven't checked, but I know you're real. I could feel it when I pressed my cheek against you. Good night."

Keena kissed his cheek with a soft expression.

"Ah... I told you to stop. Just to be sure, you know I'm the real one, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. Real or fake, you're A-chan. No matter what happens, I'll be on your side. If someone says you're a fake, I'll tell them they're wrong."

Keena was half asleep as she spoke.

Akuto smiled a bit.

"Honestly, there's no helping you... But I'm glad to hear that."

Yoshie hit the switch on the back of the doll Akuto's head where it was hidden by his hair.

The doll Akuto collapsed limply and the surface mana scattered, leaving only the original smooth doll.

"I do feel bad about being selfish, but I'd be too embarrassed to tell the real one."

She called Keisu back into the room and had her take care of the collapsed doll.

"And I know you didn't want to disappear," she said to the doll. "You may have been a copy, but you had a soul, so you would have no purpose without a meaning to your birth. That's probably why you were so desperate. You had to have known your identity would be discovered even if you temporarily won over the empress. ...I really am sorry I did this for such a selfish reason. I need to be more honest."

"Boss, why is Akuto-dono collapsed here?"

Keisu looked up at her questioningly.

"That's because this is a doll."

"I know that, but I could have sworn this was the real one."

"I was pretty sure the real one would be worried enough to head for Keena while out looking for the doll, so I decided to contact the doll myself. He must have been worried once he realized Korone could tell he was the fake. I immediately realized it, but I decided to trick him in order to switch him off."

"I see. But it sounded like you were talking about something complicated."

Yoshie shook her head.

"You don't have to understand. I just felt I needed to apologize to him about something. Oh, but I also need to apologize to the real one."

She scratched at her head.

"Why?"

"Because I indirectly made the school hate him even more."

Just as she was saying that, Akuto was leaving the reception room. He had already received word that the doll had been deactivated and he had set Keena to sleep.

He was feeling oddly exhilarated, but that proved to be a mistake. As he walked casually down the hall, he ended up in a crowd of students and finally noticed the strange atmosphere surrounding the entire student body.

"Um, did this cause a lot of problems by any chance?"

What happened next was much too gruesome to write here.

Chapter 3: The Three Officers' Enjoyable Day Off

The three officers of the student council were always busy. It was not that President Lily Shiraishi was irresponsible. She simply felt she could ignore the more formal aspects as long as she did the bare minimum of what was needed, so the odd jobs were always left to the vice president, treasurer and secretary.

"I don't have enough tomato juice, arinsu," said Ootake Michie as she stared at a mana screen.

She always had white skin, red eyes, and an unhealthy appearance, but she currently looked especially sickly.

"There's some tomato juice on your desk, gya," said Kamiyama Kanna while pointing to Michie's desk.

She had a boyish or even wild appearance, but with her hair disheveled and the exhausted look on her face, she went beyond wild and looked more like a castaway. Her mana screen also displayed a large amount of data.

"The tomato juice you bought doesn't have any salt, arinsu!"

Michie pounded on the desk and the can of tomato juice with a straw in it bounced up a bit.

Kanna grimaced in annoyance.

"You can't put salt in tomato juice, gya. It has to be unsalted, gya. Natural is best, gya."

"Can't you do something about that naturalism of yours, arinsu? When I'm tired, I want salt. I won't give that up, arinsu."

"How about you let your sweat dry and lick up that, gya?"

"You must really want me to pluck out all of your hair, arinsu."

Michie and Kanna stopped moving as they glared at each other.

Having noticed the situation's downward spiral, the third member spoke up.

"Guga."

She was a tall, bespectacled L'Isle-Adam with long black hair. Like many L'Isle-Adams, she gave a cool impression and her expression rarely changed. However, there was something in her tone that left no room for argument.

Michie and Kanna both leaned back in their chairs.

"I suppose it is my fault for being so exhausted, arinsu."

"And I realize I'm being irritable, gya."

"Guga, guuga, guga, guga," continued the L'Isle-Adam whose name was Arnoul.

Michie smiled in amusement. She and Kanna could understand what she said.

"I see. You're right, arinsu. We do need to get out sometimes, arinsu."

"Come to think of it, we haven't had a day off in a while, gya."

"That's because of what happened during the Zero War, arinsu. We haven't gotten any rest since then, arinsu."

"We've been busy cleaning up even though we were injured too, gya. The president is so cold-hearted, gya."

"Then how about we cut loose for once, arinsu?"

"Sounds great, gya!"

Michie and Kanna were excited.

"Guga."

"Arnoul, don't worry about paying for anything, gya. This can count as an apology for punching you while you were being controlled by Zero,

gya."

Kanna beat her chest proudly and Michie looked over with admiration.

"You sure are generous, arinsu."

"No, I mean the two of us will pay for her, gya."

"Really? Well, fine. If it's for Arnoul, arinsu."

Michie looked surprised at first, but she quickly grinned.

Kanna smiled as well, but her expression soon grew serious.

"But we still have to worry about the president, gya."

"She'll never allow us a day off, arinsu."

"Guga."

They all crossed their arms in thought, but they could not find anything to say. Finally, Kanna shook her head.

"Thinking about it isn't going to help, gya!"

"There's just no way to get a day off out of her, arinsu."

Michie also spread her arms in defeat, but Arnoul opened her mouth to suggest something.

"Guga, guga."

As if influenced by those words, a glint entered Kanna's eyes.

"We just have to make a run for it, gya."

Michie nodded with a serious expression.

"The president is dealing with a call. This is our chance, arinsu."

Michie and Kana exchanged a grin. They kicked away their chairs simultaneously, turned around, and rushed for the door. As the door burst open, they slid out into the hallway and ran. Arnoul walked calmly, yet somehow matched the other two's speed.

But they all came to a stop when a voice called out from behind them.

"Hey, perfect timing. I just got an odd call."



They did not need to turn around to know the voice belonged to Lily Shiraishi.

They began moving once more and quickly dashed forward.

"...Hey, wait! Where the hell do you think you're going!?"

Lily's arm extended, but those three were used to it. They quickly turned a corner and escaped Lily's pursuit.

Lily was left behind, not knowing what happened.

"What's with them? ...Dammit, they're ditching their duties, aren't they? When they get back, I'll torture them with my grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers until they wish they were dead."

She grimaced.

"But what was with that request? 'A L'Isle-Adam servant at my house headed toward the academy while saying she would defeat the demon king'?"

She pulled out her student handbook and searched for who she wanted to call telepathically.

"I doubt those three will answer, so I'll use the public morals committee. And he's the one that started this in the first place, so let's see if he can actually help society recover."

She then telepathically called Sai Akuto.

"The president must be mad, gya."

"We already made up our minds, so we can't worry about that, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie sighed with dark expressions as they entered the city, but Arnoul shook her head.

"Guga."

"You're right, arinsu," said Michie with a nod. "We should forget it and just have fun, arinsu."

"I see, gya," said Kanna.

They were quick to switch gears and Kanna quickly filled with energy.

"Okay, let's have some fun, gya! Let's start with a light snack of udon and pizza, gya. And then..."

"But you always turn into your beast form after seeing something resembling the full moon like the egg in udon or a pizza, arinsu. Also, that's a lot more than a light snack, arinsu." Michie sounded annoyed, but she still smiled. "But pizza does sound good, arinsu. Come to think of it, a new pizza place was opened by the winner in a competition for spinning pizza dough in one hand, arinsu."

"Then let's get pizza, gya. I won't look at it until its cut, gya. And pizza has the tomato you love so much, gya."

"And I can pour as much red tabasco sauce as I want, arinsu. Come to think of it, Italian food has a lot of red things, arinsu."

"I can't wait, gya!"

The three smiling girls began walking, but Arnoul suddenly spoke.

"Guga."

"Eh? Someone's behind us?"

"No, don't turn around, gya."

Michie and Kanna sounded nervous.

Someone was following them.

"I don't want to get dragged into a commotion after taking this day off, arinsu."

"Hm. That's a L'Isle-Adam, gya."

Kanna's nose twitched as she used her sense of smell.

All three of them held power in a school filled with violent students and they had been involved in more than one war in the past. They looked cute, but they were highly skilled at combat. They estimated their pursuer's abilities without turning around.

"But she's really bad at hiding, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Hm. She's a farming model rather than a combat model? Oh, is that why I smell dirt, gya?"

"I don't know what she wants, but it shouldn't be a problem for us, arinsu."

"Yeah. If it comes down to it, we can do something about it, gya. But it'll be a problem if she follows us, gya. Let's lose her and then have some fun, gya. We'll meet at the soba restaurant in the shopping district."

The three then ran off. They split in three directions at the corner and slipped into the crowd. They would have lost even a skilled pursuer, so a non-combat L'Isle-Adam could never keep up.

Finally, they gathered at the soba restaurant one by one.

"We lost her just fine, gya."

"Now we can relax and eat some soba, ari-... What happened to Italian, arinsu!?"

"Guga."

"I reflexively chose the easiest place to meet up, gya. If we eat some soba, drink some sake, and look around for some new clothes, we'll be hungry again soon enough, gya."

"You should skip the sake, arinsu."

The three of them opened the menu and ordered something light. Finally, sweet soba, normal soba, and buckwheat porridge were lined up on the table.

"Do you mix the wasabi into the soup or put it on the noodles, gya?"

"I've never really paid attention, arinsu."

"Guga."

"You can only eat the buckwheat porridge? Oh, that's right, gya."

The three of them reached for their bowls and continued their ridiculous conversation until they noticed the other customers being oddly noisy.

"Huh?"

"What's with her? Does she want to eat?"

"Don't look!"

All of the customers were looking in one direction and muttering amongst themselves. They were looking toward the window the three girls sat at.

"I have a bad feeling about this, arinsu."

Michie hesitantly turned toward the window.

"Gya!"

"Guga."

Kanna and Arnoul cried out.

A L'Isle-Adam was pressed up against the window.

"That's the one that was following us, gya! I thought we lost her, gya!"

"Guga."

"I see. She's been going around and peering into all the shops and restaurants, arinsu!"

Behind the L'Isle-Adam, people at other shops and restaurants were watching her uneasily. She was drawing their attention.

The L'Isle-Adam looked like a little girl with slender arms and legs. A close look showed she had the same well-featured face as most L'Isle-Adams, but she did not seem to be tending to her looks. Overall, she looked like an energetic rural child.

"So... Who is she, gya?"

"Wh-who knows... Now that she's gone this far, I can't even guess, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie exchanged a glance and stopped moving.

The L'Isle-Adam stared at the three girls like a child wanting a trumpet or a hovering kingfisher targeting a fish in the water. Her expression hinted at a reckless enthusiasm within her. It was an unusual expression for a L'Isle-Adam.

She reached a hand behind her back and pulled out a small sickle. She then left the window and entered through the automatic door. Needless to say, she headed straight for the three girls.

"Wh-wh-what is it, gya!?"

"If you want to say something, calm down and say it, arinsu."

Without listening to Kanna or Michie, the L'Isle-Adam swung up the sickle.

"My name is Monami! I have come to defeat the demon king! I will first exterminate the demon king's three underlings!"

The L'Isle-Adam that gave the name Monami charged toward Kanna and swung down the sickle.

"Toh!"

But it only produced a quiet and silly noise.

Kanna had stopped the sickle by catching the blade between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

"C-calm down, gya. No one as cute as us could be the demon king's underlings, gya."

"Liar! You're wearing the uniform!"

Monami struggled, but Kanna lifted the sickle and her along with it.

"The uniform?"

"The school uniform?"

Kanna and Michie exchanged a glance.

"That's the uniform of the demon king's underlings! So I'll exterminate you!" shouted Monami.

"Say what you want, but I still don't get it, gya."

Unsure what to do, Kanna fell silent. Michie then elbowed her in the side.

"A-anyway, let's head outside, arinsu. We're causing trouble for the restaurant, arinsu."

"R-right." Kanna nodded. "It looks like we are, gya."

The customers and workers were staring at them.

Kanna passed her wallet to Arnoul, grabbed as much soba as she could stuff into her mouth, and walked outside with Monami still hanging down from her hand.

"Hey! Let me go, you coward! Fight me fair and square!"

"Yes, yes. I understand, gya. But let's head somewhere else, gya."

"Um, I apologize for the inconvenience, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie continued bowing to the other people even after leaving the restaurant.

As Monami showed no sign of quieting down, they exchanged a troubled glance.

"Guga."

Arnoul left after paying and she pointed to the other end of the shopping district.

"Good idea, arinsu. Let's go the park, arinsu."

"That would be best, gya."

Monami continued to struggle as they walked to the park.

"Let me go! Cowards!"

"You could always just let go of the sickle, gya," suggested Kanna after arriving in the park.

"Oh," said Monami in sudden realization. "You're right."

She let go, fell to the ground, and pointed confidently at Kanna.

"Heh heh heh heh. Now that I'm free, you don't stand a chance. Prepare yourself!"

Monami tried to rush at Kanna again.

"I told you to calm down, gya."

Kanna swung her hand. The fingers still held the sickle and the sickle's handle passed within a few dozen centimeters of Monami's face. But Monami jumped backwards with a frightened look.

"A weapon!? You coward! I get it now. You told me to let go so you could steal my weapon! How dastardly! But I should have expected no less from the demon king's underlings!"

"No, we aren't his underlings, gya."

Kanna was getting annoyed, but Monami had lost her temper.

But then Arnoul stood in Monami's way.

"Guga."

"Nh, you sure are big!"

Monami flinched back.

"Guga, guga, guuga."

"Are you also saying you aren't the demon king's underlings?"

Monami could understand Arnoul's words. And Arnoul then started using a compressed language that other L'Isle-Adams could understand.

"Guga, guuga, guga, guga, guga, guguguga."

"Eh? The demon king goes to the school that uniform belongs to, but he hasn't taken over the school? And there are a lot of other people who want to exterminate the demon king, but they have all given up after failing? Really?"

Momami repeated what Arnoul was saying.

Arnoul had also conveyed a lot more information to her, but it seemed Monami had only understood that. But that was enough.

"I see..." She looked down with a sad look. "I just wanted to defeat the demon king. I shouldn't have done that to you three. I apologize."

Monami bowed deeply.

"As long as you understand, gya. If you've learned your lesson, stop doing stupid things, gya. Don't attack anyone else just because they're wearing this uniform, gya."

With that, Kanna returned the sickle.

Momami stored it at her waist and began trudging away.

Michie gave a bitter look as she watched her leave.

"I feel like we did something wrong, arinsu."

"What else could we have done, gya? Also, if she's a L'Isle-Adam why is she a small child and why is she so stupid, gya?"

Kanna pouted her lips.

"Guga," responded Arnoul.

According to her, child L'Isle-Adams were created for old people with no children of their own and no one to look after. However, they would often change owners due to their purchaser's death. And when one stayed in one place long enough to gain a sense of self, no one would buy them and they would end up helping with light work such as gardening.

"Also, there's a good chance that this one has some kind of defect, arinsu."

Michie's tone was dark.

"But she must have an owner, gya."

"Guga."

"Even if she does, we can't contact them right away and her telepathic communication ability is probably broken, arinsu?"

Michie shrugged at Arnoul's explanation.

An awkward silence followed.

"W-well, let's go eat some pizza, gya. I can't taste the soba anymore, gya."

Kanna forced a smile.

"Guga."

"Th-that's right, arinsu," said Michie awkwardly. "Even Arnoul is saying we should avoid having anything more to do with her, arinsu."

She and Kanna wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders and began to walk.

"Let's enjoy skipping out on work, gya!"

"Let's enjoy our day without the president, arinsu!"

Their motions were exaggerated, but they had a dead look in their eyes as they went window shopping. Their laughing voices sounded empty.

"Ah ha ha. This is fun, gya."

"It really is, arinsu."

"Guga."

The amount of silence naturally grew. And during that silence, they heard a horrible sound behind them.

Crash!

They turned around with a very bad feeling about what they would find. As expected, they found Monami. And even worse, she seemed to have tripped while charging toward a man sitting outside a café.

"Gya, gya..."

"This is horrible, arinsu..."

Kanna and Michie held their heads in their hands. The man was clearly not just a normal café customer. He wore a brightly-colored suit and had lots of oddly-colored metal accessories jangling about.

"Prepare yourself, underling of the demon king!"

After knocking over one of the café's seats, Monami began saying the same things as before.

Luckily, the man was simply taken aback and had yet to grow angry.

Kanna and Michie exchanged a bitter smile.

"Should we do it, gya?"

"Do we have any other choice, arinsu?"

Michie nodded and Kanna began to run. Kanna jumped in, grabbed Monami, and immediately turned around. Michie then jumped in, fixed the chair and table, and bowed too quickly for anyone to argue.

"I am so very sorry, arinsu! Bye!"

She then ran off even more quickly than Kanna had.

"Sigh... I can't believe this, gya."

"We told you to stop that, arinsu."

After escaping to somewhere or other, they began lecturing Monami while Kanna held her.

But Monami merely looked displeased and said nothing.

"Guga."

Arnoul finally gave in and asked a question, but Monami repeated what she had said before.

"But I have to defeat the demon king."

"And we told you to stop, gya."

Monami shook her head.

"I have to defeat him."

"Y'know, if you really think that, why are you attacking people indiscriminately, gya? Do you not actually know who the demon king is, gya?"

But Monami denied Kanna's accusation.

"He is Sai Akuto of Constant Magic Academy."

"If you know that, why are you going around randomly, gya?"

"The demon king has lots of underlings. It's only natural to defeat them and build up experience."

What she said did have a logic to it, but she showed no sign of growth and she was targeting the wrong people.

"He doesn't have that many underlings and the empress is currently suppressing his power, gya."

Kanna continued arguing, but Monami refused to believe her.

"He has underlings all throughout the city and a lot of the students are his underlings."

"We already told you that isn't the case, gya."

Kanna was unsure what else to say, but suddenly Michie clapped her hands together.

"Then how about we guide you, arinsu?"

"Eh?"

Both Kanna and Monami let out voices of surprise.

Michie then whispered in Kanna's ear.

"I don't know the exact situation, but this is just a child's game, arinsu. If it comes to it, we can call in Sai Akuto and have him play with her a bit, arinsu."

"I see, gya." Kanna agreed. "Okay, gya. We can help you, gya."

She lowered Monami and beat her own chest.

"Help me?"

"That's right, gya. We'll take you to Sai Akuto, gya. We'll fight him with you, gya."

Kanna sounded confident.

With Akuto, they could attack with their full strength and not have to worry. And seeing the intensity of those attacks would surprise Monami enough that she would believe the demon king had been defeated.

However...

"Then let's go! Come with me."

Monami took the lead and began walking. She was acting like she was the leader.

"We said we would guide you, gya."

But Kanna could not get through to her.

"Like I said, we have to do this in order. I know where his underlings are. This just means I don't need to build up experience. You're really strong, after all."

She took long strides forward as she spoke.

The other three quickly followed.

"Eh? You know where his underlings are, arinsu?"

"That's right. I looked into it. Now, come with me, underlings!"

Monami delightedly raised her sickle and walked on.

"Wait... Where are you going, gya?"

"I already told you: to where the demon king's underlings are."

She was walking down a normal residential district.

"Why are we here, arinsu?"

Michie was confused, but Monami stopped in front of a small apartment.

"What? Is this it, gya?"

Monami did not answer Kanna and she walked swiftly up to the apartment. She picked a block off the ground, held it over her head with

both hands, and smashed it against the window.

Crash!

"Gya!

"Ee!"

A great sound of destruction rang out, causing Kanna and Michie to cry out in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

A man in a baggy shirt stuck his head out the window. His head was shaved. In fact, he did not even have eyebrows. He was clearly not a normal person.

"R-run away, gya!"

"This is not good, arinsu!"

Kanna and Michie began to flee, but Monami acted before they could.

"Toh."

She let out a silly cry of effort and stabbed the tip of her sickle into the skinhead's head.

"Gyaaaaa!"

"Eeeeeeeee!"

Kanna and Michie screamed even louder.

Blood flowed from the skinhead's head. He had only been stabbed a tiny bit, but he did a wonderful job of bleeding.

"What the hell!?" he roared.

Kanna and Michie glanced around in preparation to run, but Arnoul muttered "guga" and pointed past the road. An angry-looking man was running over. It was the man Monami had tried to attack at the café.

"Is he related to this, arinsu?"

"Wh-what are we supposed to do, gya?"

While Michie and Kanna muttered in confusion, the skinhead grabbed Monami and lifted her up.

"Let me go! Stop that!"

"Don't look down on me, you brat!"

The skinhead gave an amazingly angry look and it was clear something bad was going to happen to Monami.

"Sh-should we do it, gya?"

"I-I'm not sure, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie sweated.

It was not that they were not confident in their ability to win. They were worried about what would happen to an opponent whose ability was not past a certain point.

As they hesitated, Arnoul swiftly ran up.

"Guga!"

She snatched Monami away and knocked away the sickle that the skinhead was attempting to pull from his head and stab into Monami.

"Tch! Who the hell're you!?"

With that shout, the skinhead reached out his right hand. The hand glowed and he fired a mana sphere toward Arnoul.

"Guga!"

Arnoul easily deflected it, but the man's use of magic meant Kanna and Michie could act.

"If you're attacking in the city, it means you're black magicians, gya!"

"In that case, we need not hold back, arinsu!"

The two girls exchanged a nod and moved to the left and right.

"Dogyaaaan!"

Kanna gained a beast's right paw and blasted away the skinhead's attack.

"Take this!"

Michie created a gust of wind and scooped the other man off his feet. She circled around behind him and attacked the back of his neck. He immediately passed out and collapsed to the street.

"If they were black magicians..."

"...it means they really were that kind of person, gya."

Michie and Kanna exchanged a glance.

"Guga."

Arnoul lowered Monami and spoke to the other two girls.

"Guga, guga."

"Eh? What does that mean, gya?"

"Are you saying Monami isn't completely lying, arinsu?"

"Guga, guuga."

Arnoul then gave a summarized version of what Monami had told her.

From what she had seen of Monami's list of the demon king's underlings, they all worked for a group that maliciously bought up land.

"And they're threatening Monami's family to buy their home, arinsu?"

"If that's the problem, we just have to turn them in to the knights, gya."

Kanna was relieved.

"That's right, arinsu. They were probably name-dropping the demon king in their threats, arinsu. If they were the only ones doing anything illegal, this solves everything, arinsu. Now, we don't have time, arinsu. We need to report them, get Monami home, and get some pizza for dinner, arinsu."

"Guga."

Arnoul cut into Michie's happy plans.

"Eh? It isn't that easy, arinsu?"

"Guga, guuga."

"They've bribed the knights, arinsu? They're backed by an illegal group that just wants to commit crimes and doesn't care about the ideals of the black magicians, arinsu?"

"That isn't good, gya."

"I guess just going to the knights is out of the question, arinsu. And come to think of it, there isn't a knight in this city the president hasn't punched, arinsu."

"I doubt they'd be happy to see us even without the bribe, gya. And the knights wouldn't want to take on this group without preparations, gya."

Michie and Kanna's expression gradually darkened.

"Well, can't we just report them, gya? And then leave...gya?"

Kanna forced a smile.

But Michie was not smiling.

"We obviously can't, arinsu. They'd go to Monami's home to take revenge, arinsu."

"Well, yes... But what else can we do, gya?"

"We have to handle it ourselves, arinsu."

Michie shrugged.

"Guga."

Arnoul pointed behind them.

The man Michie had knocked out had stood up and was making a telepathic call while running away.

"This just got a whole lot worse, gya. Now we can't attack their office, gya."

"Monami, Take us to your home. If you don't, it will be destroyed, arinsu."

"So this is Monami's home, arinsu."

"To be blunt, it's...falling apart, gya."

"Guga."

Even Arnoul agreed.

The property was large, but the home in the center was a wooden single-story building. It was made luxuriously, but it was simply too old. The sign called it the Sasahara Inn and it looked a lot like a haunted mansion.

"But I can see why they want the land, gya."

Kanna looked around. The area alone was an oasis of green in the middle of the city. They seemed to own a rather large nature park.

"If they quit being an inn and opened a restaurant, they could probably make a lot of money, arinsu."

"No matter what they do, it doesn't go well. It's so bad that they have to eat the vegetables I grow over there."

Monami pointed toward an orderly vegetable garden by the side of the building.

"Why can't they make any money, gya?"

"That isn't the problem right now, arinsu. This is a difficult place to defend, arinsu."

Those three girls were used to fights, so they could immediately tell how poor an area this was for defending. The other side could travel while hiding behind the trees and they could also set fire to the house.

"This isn't gonna be easy, gya."

"Guga."

As they spoke, a nice-looking couple exited the inn. The wife was quite round and the husband was tall and slender.

"Monami!"

The wife ran over.

"Um, about this, arinsu..."

Before Michie could say anything, the wife bowed.

"Thank you so much. You are from the academy, aren't you? You brought her back just like we asked. She ran off after saying she would defeat the demon king."

It seemed they understood the situation. That sped things up, but they did not seem to fully understand.

"Um, there's more, gya..."

"Yes?"

"It seems, um... Monami-chan attacked and angered the demon king's underlings...well, they weren't really his underlings, gya."

Kanna gave her troubled explanation, but the wife only blinked and did not seem to understand.

"Oh... Is that so?"

"No, you don't understand, gya. Um, to put it simply, some dangerous people will be coming to burn down the house, gya."

Kanna's blunt explanation finally made the wife panic.

"Ehhhh! Wh-wh-what should we do?"

"We can only fight, gya. We'll handle it, so you hole up somewhere in the house and hold onto Monami, gya. She'll try to fight if someone doesn't stop her, gya."

Kanna handed Monami over to the wife.

The wife clung to Monami and began bowing.

"I do not know how to thank you."

"You can think about that later, arinsu. Right now, you need to get inside the house, arinsu."

As Michie urged them on, the husband and wife took Monami inside.

"Now, how will they try to attack, gya?"

"Guga."

"Yeah. They'll probably decide crushing the house is faster than threatening, gya."

"No matter how it happened, we were the ones that attacked them, arinsu. They should go pretty far, arinsu. They probably know the knights won't show up if they only destroy the house, arinsu."

"But they saw us, gya. They'll probably focus on taking revenge against us, so they'll try to pick a fight with us before going after the house, gya."

"Guga."

"They might destroy the house to draw us out, arinsu? It's dangerous,

but we'll have to split up and surround the house, arinsu."

The three of them made their plans.

Once they finished, they sensed something out of the ordinary running through the surrounding trees.

"They're here, gya."

"Split up, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three of them ran in three different directions.

It was evening and an incantation gun fired to signal the beginning of the battle.

It was fired toward Kanna who was protecting the rear of the house.

"An explosive type, gya!"

She had been caught off guard, so she had successfully evaded the bullet but was caught in the intense explosion.

The explosion shook the ground and smoke rose into the sky.

To check on his handiwork, the black magician who had fired appeared from the trees while holding an incantation gun.

He expected to see Kanna collapsed on the ground, but when the smoke cleared, he saw a large four-legged beast. It resembled a giant wolf.

"What!?" he cried out in surprise.

"If you're gonna do that, I'll go all out from the beginning, gya!"

Kanna let out a roar in her beast form. She quickly charged toward the black magician, immediately knocked him to the ground, and knocked his weapon away.

But the other black magicians changed their tactics when they saw that. They fired mana spheres and incantation guns from the trees while moving around.

"Gya, gya. Just because the academy students aren't easy to kill doesn't mean it's okay to fire your weapons like crazy, gya."

Kanna complained, but she still kicked off tree trunks, jumped through the air, and knocked three to the ground without setting foot on the ground herself.

However, the attacks continued.

"It looks like defeating me is their only goal now, gya."

Michie was feeling the same as Kanna.

"These guys must have had a run-in with the president before, arinsu."

In the city, Lily Shiraishi was known as the "long-armed demon" by knights and this sort of person. The name came from her habit of stretching her arms and punching anyone she didn't like. It was not surprising that the knights and this sort of person hated her. They had likely remembered the trio who followed the president and hated them as well.

Just like Kanna, Michie was forced into a hard fight. She was calling in mechanical bats and attacking with them. That should have given her quite an advantage in this environment, but it seemed some of the black magicians were quite skilled. They had noticed the weak point of the mechanical bats and had started using magic to create ultrasonic interference. That meant Michie could only control the bats she could see.

"If I call the bats back toward me, I can protect myself and the house, arinsu. But..."

She was hiding behind the incinerator, so she was not being fired on like Kanna was, but this was no different from hiding behind cover and firing back and forth. And if it came down to a war of attrition, the side with greater numbers would have the upper hand.

"This isn't good, arinsu."

Arnoul was having a difficult fight as well. She was forced to fight an excavator that the black magicians had brought with them, and she was doing so bare-handed.

"Gugaga..."

She held the bucket and blocked its path forward, but even with her ridiculous strength, that was the most she could manage. And while she could not move, the black magicians fired mana spheres and incantation guns from a distance. She was resisting with a defense field, but it used up a lot of mana and could not defend against all of it.

"Gugagaga... Guga!" she screamed.

The excavator's arm moved back and forth and Arnoul could not resist its strength while using some of her own power for defense.

The bucket lifted her up and tossed her away.

"Guga!"

After being thrown to the ground, she felt something soft on her back, so she looked behind her. Kanna and Michie had been tossed over at the same time.

"Uuh... Th-this isn't good, gya."

"At best, we have our hands full just protecting ourselves, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three girls exchanged muddy glances.

But before they could do anything, they were surrounded by ill-bred black magicians.

"You underestimated us, little ladies."

A man with a white suit and a pompadour who seemed to be the leader stepped forward.

The girls remained silent and the man in a white suit continued speaking.

"Well, I don't want this to get any more complicated, so let's settle this here. We won't kill you, but we need to make sure you cry nicely."

He used his chin to gesture to the other men. Three men stepped forward, grabbed the girls' hair, and forced them to their feet.

"They might call for help. Break the inn's lock and force your way in."

On the leader's instructions, a few men began kicking down the door.

"S-stop..." groaned Kanna, but another man silenced her with a punch to the gut.

"Gh..."

She grimaced more from the humiliation than the pain.

"Stay quiet. We won't kill you. We brought enough people to fight a war because we thought your president was coming, but it looks like we lucked out. It's too late to call her now."

As the leader said that, the men successfully kicked down the inn's door.

"Gh... We should've called the president, gya."

"We were skipping out on work, so we couldn't, arinsu."

"Uuh... I just wanted some pizza, gya. Why did this have to happen, gya?"

Kanna lamented, but no one was listening.

Except for one person.

"Oh, dear. It looks like nothing will make everyone happy here."

The black magicians frowned at the voice from behind them.

“What kind of gutless shit are you going on about?”

The man in a white suit had assumed one of his men said that, but he froze in place once he turned around.

“Wha-...? That’s the real deal!”

“The real deal?” muttered the other black magicians.

The person the leader was referring to groaned with a difficult expression.

“If you’re gonna be that surprised when I show up, I’d prefer you didn’t use my name in the first place.”

“Eh? Then...”

The black magicians frantically moved away from him.

“You idiots! This is no time to chicken out!”

The leader pointed at the newcomer – Sai Akuto – and gestured toward their three hostages.

The black magicians began pressed incantation guns against the girls' faces.

Akuto grimaced.

"This is why I said nothing will make everyone happy."

In the very next instant, the arms of the men holding the girls spread to either side. It was as if their bodies had moved against their wills.

"H-hey, what the hell are you doing?" fearfully asked the man in a white suit.

"I-I don't know. It feels like some ridiculous strength is holding me."

The leader turned back toward Akuto.

Akuto nodded with a cloudy expression.

"I'm doing that, but I really don't want to. Of course, I doubt you care about what I want, so let's keep this short and free of explanations."

"Wh-what the hell are you talking-... Eh!?"

The leader tried to fire some magic, but his movements were stopped. His arms spread on their own and it looked like he was hanging from a cross.

"Impossible... You can't have enough mana strength to hold this many people at once!" shouted the leader in confusion.

He still had no fear in his expression which brought a look of disappointment to Akuto's face.

"If you understand that, then can you guess what I'm thinking right now? In other words, can you guess what you have to do for me to forgive you?"

Akuto let out a sigh.

The leader and his men seemed to finally catch on. They all gave obedient smiles and began apologizing.

"W-we're so very sorry for using your name. It's just that your name is so respected in the world. I know! How about you make us your official underlings?"

Akuto shook his head without even bothering to listen to the end.

"No. That isn't what I want."

There was no anger in his voice, but the man in the white suit let out a tremendous shriek. His right arm twisted and produced cracking noises.

"Gyaaaah! I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Th-that wasn't what I meant... W-we will

back off from this entire incident... So..."

"That isn't it either."

Akuto spoke like a parent scolding a child and he turned toward the leader's left arm. This time, the man's left arm twisted much too far. Another scream rose into the dark sky.

"You're apologizing to the wrong person. Do you really not understand that?"

Akuto waved a hand and all the black magicians floated up into the air. They then all lined up side by side in front of Akuto as if they were sucked toward him.

Their expressions were frozen in terror, but Akuto spoke much like a teacher.

"Now, does anyone know what the right thing to do is?"

Unsurprisingly, none of them dared say anything. Surrounded by silence, Akuto shook his head in annoyance.

"You're supposed to apologize to those three."

He waved his hand again. Five nearby men's arms twisted and five screams burst out.

Those whose arms remained untwisted frantically began apologizing.

"I'm sorry! I-I'm sorry!"

But Akuto immediately rejected those apologies.

"Apologizing after you're told to is worthless!"

Another five arms or legs twisted.

The black magicians writhed about on the ground after having their skeletal structure destroyed.

"Now, does anyone know what you should do?" asked Akuto once more.

But once again, no one responded. As he repeated the question again and again, all thirty of the black magicians eventually began writhing on the ground and giving pathetic screams.

"H-how frightening, gya."

"I-is this what you call a lecturing criminal, arinsu? No, this is even worse than that, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three rescued girls gathered together and trembled.

"Why don't you understand? Why can't you do something as simple as apologizing properly and then swearing to live a proper life?"

Akuto shook his head with a dark look.

"W-we swear! We swear already!"

The man in the white suit was in tears.

But Akuto shook his head again.

"Again, doing it after I tell you to is worthless."

He began to twist some more limbs, but he realized there were no more limbs left to twist.

"Well, whatever. What matters is that you truly understand. That's what it comes down to."

As he muttered those words, the black magicians floated into the air again. Mana gathered around their twisted limbs and they visually returned to normal. Their pale faces even regained their color.

They gained relieved smiles and shed tears of regret.

"Th-thank you. We understand now. We've had a change of heart."

The leader quickly prostrated himself before Akuto.

In that instant, Akuto's eyes glittered in displeasure.

"I told you in the beginning that you're apologizing to the wrong person. This is just you apologizing because I hurt you!"

Akuto shouted angrily and twisted the man's entire body this time.

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

The gruesome sight caused all the other black magicians to tremble. The three girls were at a loss for words as well.

Akuto looked down on them coldly and spoke in a troubled tone.

"I will twist you and heal you as many times as it takes for you to understand. If even one of you fails to understand, the responsibility will lie with the entire group. Do you understand?"

The black magicians were unable to speak.

"I've seen this kind of unreasonableness before, gya."

"That was our PE teacher during elementary school, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie trembled, but they could only watch the scene playing out before them.

Human bones broke, human bodies were bent in all sorts of horrible ways, and then they were regenerated. It was like peeking into hell itself.

When the destruction and regeneration reached its third cycle, the people of the Sasahara family noticed something was odd and cautiously peeked out from the destroyed front door.

"Eeeee!"

"Waaaaaah!"

Just seeing it was enough for the wife and husband's legs to give out.

Not many could remain sane after seeing the demon king standing coldly before a group of ill-bred men who writhed in a pool of blood after their skeletons had been crushed.

"It's the real demon king!"

"A-at least spare us our lives!"

After shouting that, the two fainted.

Seeing that, Akuto finally reflected on the situation. He walked over to

the three girls and scratched his head.

"Sorry. I should have chosen a better place for this."

"...I think this goes beyond that, gya."

"Y-you went a little overboard...arinsu."

"Guga."

They all shook their heads in confusion.

Then a stone flew their way. Akuto deflected it with a hand just before it reached Kanna.

"Monami," muttered Michie after looking toward where the stone had come from.

"Wahhhhhh! You really do work with the demon king! Otherwise, you wouldn't do something so horrible in front of the house and knock out my masters! And the house is damaged, too! Leave! Leave!"

As she cried and shouted, she frantically threw stones.

"Um..."

Kanna prepared to say something, but Michie stopped her.

"Don't worry about it, arinsu. The issue was resolved, arinsu."

"Guga."

Arnoul stood up and urged the other two to do the same.

Kanna nodded and stood. After walking a bit, she turned toward Monami, but Monami only threw a stone at her.

"Ah... Sorry. This was my bad. I'm not sure what to say... Well, I'll help clean up."

With a dark look, Akuto began loading the black magicians in the bucket of the excavator they had brought. He then lifted the excavator on one shoulder and walked in the opposite direction of the three girls.

With a bitter smile, Kanna watched him leave.

"He really isn't normal, gya."

"I feel stupid for taking this all so seriously, arinsu."

"Guga."

"But he will probably clean everything up, gya."

They gave the Sasahara Inn a parting glance while trudging down the nighttime streets.

"This was one hell of a day off, gya."

"Technically, it wasn't even a day off, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Yeah. We tried to slip out, but... Ah! It's past curfew, gya!"

"Ahh! You're right, arinsu!"

"Guga, guaga, guagaugaugau!"

"Arnoul, don't get so flustered, gya! Oh, but now the president's definitely gonna punish us, gya."

"Sigh... I only wanted some pizza, arinsu."

"I was planning to torture you with my grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers until you wished you were dead, but instead, you get to camp outside tonight."

When the three girls arrived back late at night, Lily Shiraishi gave them a look that made it seem like she had an itch she couldn't reach.

"C-camp outside, gya?"

"Yes. In other words, you get no dinner, you get no beds, and you don't get to go into town. Sleep in the mountain on the academy grounds. That's all."

"Um... Is that really all, arinsu?"

"You sure are insistent! If you want, I can give you morons an even greater punishment!"

As Lily shouted angrily, the other three obediently scattered.

They found a gently-sloping area of the mountain and looked up at the stars together.

"Ahh, how did it end up like this, gya?"

Kanna complained while sitting on the bare ground and Michie pouted her lips.

"Complaining won't help, arinsu. It will only make you hungrier, arinsu. Also, you'll still look fine if you get dirty, but I would much rather stay clean, arinsu."

"You're already plenty dirty from the fight, gya. Don't worry about it, gya."

"Honestly, it pisses me off that we lost, arinsu. If you had only-..."

"Guga."

"Ahh, you're right, arinsu. Fighting will only make us hungrier."

Michie rolled on her side while ignoring how dirty it was making her cape. Then she continued complaining.

"Ahh, pizza... Mozzarella and Gouda... Tomato paprika salami..."

"Quiet, gya. You're making me hungry."

"But!"

Michie thrashed her arms and legs around.

Someone then called out to them.

"Excuse me..."

"Hm?"

The turned toward the voice and found Akuto climbing the mountain with a large bag.

"Wh-what is it, gya?" asked Kanna while half averting her gaze.

Neither side was at fault, but what had happened was still awkward.

"I dealt with the issue. I even protested to the knights. Anyway, it's all taken care of. But... I heard what you said back then," he said awkwardly.

"What we said back then?" asked Michie.

Akuto lowered the bag and began gathering stones.

"Yeah. You wanted to eat pizza, right? I also heard the president wouldn't let you have any dinner."

"What does that have to do with gathering stones, gya?"

"Even a simple stove can cook things. I thought I'd make a pizza. I brought some dough and the ingredients."

Akuto arranged the stones into three sides of a square and opened the bag for the girls to see.

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

"Guga!"

Their eyes sparkled and they began to speak.

"Amazing, gya! I can see why you've won over so many girls, gya!"

"This hardworking side must be the secret, arinsu!"

"Um, I won't give you any if you keep saying that."

"Just kidding, gya! I just wanted to say I was falling for you, gya!"

"That's right, arinsu! Now, bring on the red food!"

"Why red? Anyway, go gather some wood."

"Guga."

"Then pack dirt between the stones."

Soon, Akuto began cooking the pizza. In a few minutes, he had completed a large, round, well-cooked pizza.



"Gya! Gya!"

"Oh, oh!"

"Guga!"

The three girls grew excited when they saw the pizza and Kanna carelessly turned into her beast form when she saw its round shape. They gathered around the pizza like starving children and continued eating until all the ingredients were used up. They ate three pizzas in total.

"Well, I'll be sleeping in my dorm room."

After eating a slice or two himself, Akuto thanked them and started to leave.

"Eh! Sleep here with us, gya!"

"That's right, arinsu! In fact, hold us as we sleep!"

Kanna and Michie grew ridiculously excited, but once Akuto left, they quickly grew sleepy. Michie and Arnoul lay on Kanna's stomach as she curled up in beast form.

"Oh, I just had a thought, arinsu," said Michie as she looked up in the sky.

"What is it, gya?"

"I wonder if the president lightened our punishment because Sai Akuto spoke with her, arinsu."

Kanna fell silent for a moment and then gave an impressed-sounding voice.

"Oh, you might be right, gya. But...Even with horrible people like those black magicians, a good person wouldn't smash their bones and lecture them, gya."

"You're right, arinsu. Well, let's not worry about it and just sleep, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Ah, but I am worried about Monami, gya."

"We never dealt with that misunderstanding, arinsu. But thinking about it won't help, arinsu."

The three then fell asleep.

But in the morning, someone climbed the mountain to wake them.

"Wake up."

It was Sasahara Nozomi, the maid janitor who had was already becoming famous within the academy.

"Nn..."

"Wh-why are you here to wake us up, arinsu?"

The three looked up at her with puzzled looks and Nozomi held out her work handbook.

"I got a message. I forwarded it to the student council president and she told me to show it to you and to wake you up while I was at it."

Nozomi displayed an image on the handbook. It had a message written in terrible handwriting.

<Sorry. My masters received word about what happened. Thank you. You aren't on the demon king's side. Sorry again. Thank you. –Monami>

"The president must have contacted them, gya."

"Good. Now I don't have to worry, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three of them gave relieved smiles as if they were feeling ticklish.

"Why did that ridiculous letter make you grin like that? She's so stupid that she manually wrote the message and had my mom send it. She can't do anything other than dig up potatoes."

Nozomi looked confused and Michie's eyes opened wide.

"Eh? Your mom? Ah! Come to think of it, that run-down inn's name was Sasahara, arinsu!"

"Yeah, that's my home. Sorry it's so run-down, but it won't be for long. I'll use my genius money-making scheme to turn it into a tall building. I've already made the preparations. I convinced a group to threaten people into selling their land using the demon king's name and then I

told the demon king about it. One that happens, the demon king will attack them and win. Once it's known as land protected by the demon king, its value will rise and selling a portion of the land will make me tons of... hm?"

Nozomi noticed an unusual atmosphere and looked toward the other three girls.

Their faces were as monstrous as someone who was facing their parents' killer after pursuing them for ten years.

"So you were behind all this, gya."

"I think it's time for the president's grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Eh? Wait. What are you doing? Why are you mad?"

Nozomi fearfully backed away from the three who gradually approached.

Neither Nozomi nor the other three ever spoke of what happened after that.

Chapter 4: Welcome to the Haunted Inn

"Perfect! This plan is perfect! It's flawless! Foolproof! Wonderful! The world is mine!"

Nozomi laughed alone in the janitorial room. She had written a section in her handbook that was titled "Ultimate Empress Plan". In other words, it was her last resort for becoming empress.

"This is truly my last resort. I'll call the empress to my home! And I'll use the special aspect of my home to mentally confuse her and have her give me the throne!"

She grew so excited that she shouted out all alone and her forehead glittered brightly.

"What is your home's special aspect?"

"Ghosts! The Sasahara inn is haunted! ...Wah!"

She realized someone had spoken to her from behind, so she jumped away.

She had not truly been all alone. Korone stood behind her.

"Wh-why are you here?"

"I am unsure why you would need to ask. You sent the empress a letter

saying she had been chosen to spend a night at your hot spring inn."

Korone held the letter in front of Nozomi.

"Th-that's the letter I sent out! Why is the first step of my plan here instead of with the empress!?"

"You really are stupid. I am the empress's maid, so I inspect all of her mail."

"Y-you have a system like that!? But why are you here?"

"I performed a preliminary investigation of the inn and have decided we will go."

"Ahh! My perfect plan has already failed! ...Eh? You'll go? Go where?"

As Nozomi realized what Korone had said, she turned back toward her.

"We will use these tickets and stay at the Sasahara inn for a night."

"Eh? Really? But why?"

"Is there a reason why we should not?"

"No. Of course it would be better if you did."

"Then that settles it. Oh, one other thing. These tickets are for a discount, but please make it free."

"F-free!?"

"Would you rather we not stay?"

"Th-then the empress alone can stay for free..."

Nozomi hesitantly conceded that much and Korone nodded.

"Very good. I have a feeling some others will try to tag along, so try to adapt to the situation as needed."

"U-um..."

Nozomi called out to Korone as she started to leave.

"What is it?"

"Well, um... Why are you going along with this even though you overheard my plan?"

"Because it sounds fun," immediately answered Korone.

"Eh?"

Nozomi was taken aback, but Korone quickly continued.

"That was a joke. No, about half of it was a joke."

"H-half? Then what about the other half?"

But Korone did not answer her question.

"That is a secret."

"A secret..."

Nozomi was confused, but Korone silently left the room.

"Mhh. Now I'm curious. But this is my chance. I need to put together an even more amazing plan!"

Suddenly filled with even more excitement, she began drawing up an even more ridiculous plan.

"We get to go to the hot spring!"

Keena happily showed off the tickets.

"I see. That's nice."

Akuto answered without looking away from the screen he was reading a book on.

As usual, Keena was in Akuto's room chowing down on snacks made from rice flower. His reaction was only natural, but Keena pouted her lips.

"No, A-chan. You're going too."

"Eh?"

He turned around and saw that she had three tickets spread out like a fan.

"Three? So that's you, me, and...Korone?"

"Yeah! Let's go. It'll be fun. And it's free. The rice at an inn tastes completely different!"

She was clearly excited, but Akuto looked contemplative.

"But if you stay somewhere like that, won't it cause a small commotion? And if it's just us..."

Akuto tried to decline, but Korone climbed down from her shelf and cut

in.

"I have already arranged the security, press restrictions, and other formalities. All that remains is for you to keep your hands off the empress."

"That's right! Way to go, Korone-chan. I'm exhausted from my official duties, so I need this time to relax."

"I don't recall you performing any kind of official duties. No, I guess that doesn't matter. But wait..."

He started to ask if there was more to this, but Korone stopped him with a look.

He picked up on the look in her eyes and took one of the tickets.

"Then I guess I'll go. We have different rooms, right?"

"Yes. We leave tomorrow. It is not far, so we can walk."

"It's too bad we aren't going farther away, but whatever. This'll still be fun. Okay, see you tomorrow."

Keena handed a ticket to Korone as well and left through the window.

After watching her leave, Akuto turned to Korone.

"So what is this about?"

"Look at the ticket. The inn is named Sasahara. That is the same name as that janitor. In other words, this is her home."

"Oh, that's the place I went the other day."

"Yes. As you know, Sasahara Nozomi claims to have imperial blood and she has caused trouble on multiple occasions. But my investigation has shown that there might be some truth to her claim."

"Eh? Really?"

"It is simply a possibility. I discovered a record that an imperial treasure was transferred to the Sasahara family. I have already had the Imperial Knights investigate further and they have confirmed the existence of that treasure."

"What is it?"

"The Imperial Seal. I do not know what it does, but it may be made to react to imperial blood."

"The Imperial Seal? Who would have thought the proof of an emperor would be found in a place like that."

"Indeed. It was the loss of the Imperial Seal that led to the Imperial

Regalia being used to identify the emperor. That was originally the Imperial Seal's job."

"So that's why Keena has to go."

"Yes. The Imperial Knights will be protecting her in secret. And I have had the inn operate as normal. The inn does not actually know what I have told you."

"But won't it still cause a commotion if the empress goes there?"

"This plan was suggested by Sasahara Nozomi-san who wishes to take the imperial throne. The inn is likely prepared. How they have prepared is another matter entirely, though. Also, I have prevented any effects outside the academy by shutting out all press. Rumors will spread, but only that she is spending a night at the inn. The whole truth will reach the world at large afterwards."

Korone explained it all at once and Akuto nodded.

"In that case, I will focus on stopping Nozomi-san's pranks. I hope nothing happens, though. Her parents seem like nice people."

With another contemplative look, he continued speaking.

"But why do we have to maintain the imperial system? I know I'm not one to talk, but wouldn't a system that doesn't cause commotions all the time be better?"

"Artificial intelligences like me understand that humans enjoy those commotions," said Korone.

"Yeah, I'm sure you think that and I bet the gods do too. When you aren't taking part, even war and slaughters can look enjoyable enough."

Akuto shrugged and Korone answered coolly.

"For a human, you are very much like us. And to answer your previous question, the imperial system is maintained because it is convenient."

"I understand that, but I just don't like it for some reason. I don't want to start a war, but there are systems that I want to destroy."

"That is a dangerous statement. But instead of discussing the world at large, we should focus on a much more imminent problem."

Korone pointed outside the window.

"What is it?"

Akuto looked out and saw Nozomi selling tickets.

"Come and get them! I'm selling tickets! These tickets are for the same day the empress and demon king are staying at the inn. You don't want to miss what will happen there. And they're cheap!"

She was waving around a fanned-out pile of tickets while speaking with a thick accent. She wore sunglasses and a mask and a sign made from cardboard hung from her neck.

"Wow..." said Akuto sadly.

"I did allow them to continue business as usual. Do not worry. No one would actually buy a ticket from-... Oh, there's one."

Just as Korone had said, Fujiko had latched on to the sales pitch.

"Really? Akuto-sama and Keena are staying there!?"

"Yes, it's true. Very true."

"Argh! I can't allow that! I will stay too! How much?"

"Right now, you get the discount price of 20 thousand yen."

"That is hardly a discount!"

"Then don't buy it."

Nozomi's fake accent made the conversation sound ridiculous, but Fujiko managed to drive the ticket price down to 14,500 yen.

"Oh... I don't know where she heard about this, but Kita Yoshie-san just bought one. And Kita-san has called over Hattori-san. Hattori-san is saying she does not want to go, but she just bought a ticket while pretending Kita-san forced her into it."

Korone calmly continued her running commentary.

"You don't have to explain it all..."

Akuto was holding his head in his hands after turning away from the window.

"Welcome."

The husband and wife bowed and looked nervous when they saw Akuto. Akuto knew the situation, so he gave as kind an expression as he could manage. The information they had received after the fact would have shown them they had made a misunderstanding, but they could not help but fear Akuto after what they had seen.

His unexpectedly gentle behavior must have reassured them a bit and Fujiko's well-mannered greeting must have been effective because the wife managed to properly greet Akuto like a normal guest.

In the end, Akuto, Keena, Korone, Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie were staying at the inn. They had one large room for the girls and a private room for Akuto. Also, Nozomi greeted them in the entrance with a grin on her face.

—I'll have the empress hand over the throne in their large room.

As she had that thought, she did an admirable job of bowing.

"Welcome."

"Wow. This is amazing," said Keena happily as she looked around the lobby. "I love this kind of atmosphere."

"This kind of atmosphere? Well... I suppose it does have a sort of atmosphere," said Fujiko doubtfully.

The lobby carpet was smooth and worn down. The leather of the sofa was thin and worn through in places and the glass table was cloudy. Not only were the thick wooden columns covered in small scrapes, but the surface had been shaved down so much in places that they had visibly narrowed.

"It all looks maintained, but still..."

Yoshie was as outspoken as always. While everything was certainly damaged, nothing was covered in dust. It was just all so old that normal maintenance could not hide it all.

"You shouldn't say that," scolded Junko.

However, Yoshie was right, so Junko could not exactly defend the inn's interior.

Normally, Nozomi would have said something too, but she did not react this time because she planned to make use of how old the inn was.

"It is old, but that shows how much history it holds," she said. "For example, there is that wicker chair hanging from the ceiling."

Nozomi pointed toward the back corner of the lobby where a wicker chair was attached to the ceiling with wire. No one could sit in it, so it looked like a piece of interior decoration.

"Anyone who sits in that chair will die within a week. Anyone who tries to get rid of it also dies, so we store it up there where no one can sit in it."

The biggest problem was that Nozomi's story was true.

"But... Curses don't actually exist, right?" asked Junko worriedly.

She grabbed Akuto's sleeve, but she was the only one that was afraid. Fujiko brushed Junko's hand from Akuto's sleeve and rebuked her.

"Of course not. Curses are often mistakenly thought to be a part of black magic, but anything that uses mana to function can be resisted like any other magic. If a spell has been used on it to interfere with people's internal mana and kill them, it would give off a great presence."

"Sometimes coincidences just keep happening. Then again, life would be pretty boring without those coincidences. In fact, maybe we should

assume there are mysterious things out there.”

Yoshie did not seem to take either side, but she was certainly not afraid.

As for Keena...

“A-chan, that’s amazing. And scary.”

She said it was scary, but a smile covered her entire face.

“Well, there are some things that are more fun if you believe them.”

Akuto nodded with a look of disinterest.

—Kh. But I’ve only just begun!

Nozomi mentally bit her lip, but her actual lips were smiling.

“It’s quite popular with our guests. But even just looking at it can affect your health, so let me show you to your rooms.”

Nozomi led the group further into the inn. As she walked down the hallway, she indicated an empty room.

“Three people hanged themselves in this room over a hundred year period. You need not worry because you are staying in the next room, but people sometimes hear a creaking sound from the ceiling joist. That is

the sound of the joist creaking from the weight of the rope in the next room."

Her forehead shined smoothly as she gave the creepy explanation.

"Wait a minute... Please stop that."

Junko's voice was trembling once more, but the others reacted much like before.

"You can always use necromancy to hear what the dead thought while they were alive."

"That would be the wood expanding and contracting in the cold night."

"That sounds scary, A-chan."

"Yes. Suicide is an unfortunate thing."

—I-I know modern people tend not to believe in ghosts, but these magic students are especially tough.

Nozomi began to panic.

"This here is the girls' room. It is a large room, but please be careful with the mirror on one side of the room," said Nozomi as soon as she showed them the room. "A woman in white sometimes comes from it and

I've heard she will drag people into the mirror."

"I-if you get dragged in, do you die?"

Junko's voice was trembling.

"You do," assured Nozomi.

"Eeeee!"

Junko let out a high-pitched scream, but Akuto placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If someone had died like that, there would be records of it. Sasahara-san, I know you're trying to make this an enjoyable experience, but you'll ruin it if you go too far."

"No, this is very true. I am trying to warn you."

"Sure, sure."

Akuto did not feel like arguing, but then Fujiko clung to his arm.

"Kyah! How scary! What should I do? The evil spirit of the mirror is going to kill me! If that happens, will you protect me, Akuto-sama?"

She gave him an upturned look, but he gave a troubled frown.

"Sorry, but even I can tell you're faking that."

"Tch!"

Fujiko clicked her tongue.

Afterwards, the girls remained in the large room and Nozomi led Akuto to his room.

And for some reason, Korone was tagging along.

"You don't have to see my room."

"I would like to know where your room is just in case."

Nozomi was giving the histories of the rooms as usual and Akuto had been ignoring her, but what she said next caught his attention.

"And the room beyond this one is sealed off. Soon after the inn opened, a horrible mass murder occurred there and it has been sealed ever since."

Akuto exchanged a glance with Korone.

"Could something be hidden in there?"

"Heh heh heh. I take it you've heard? The legendary vase that seals an evil spirit is contained inside. And that vase is actually..."

Nozomi continued her explanation, but Akuto looked Korone in the eye.

She nodded and whispered to him.

"The item was found in their underground storeroom, but the knights have not actually performed the final check to see if it is real or not. It looks like we need to continue the investigation."

"Yes," said Akuto.

"Huh? Why are you whispering to each other? Are you scared? Then you should be careful."

Nozomi grinned while ignorant of what they were truly talking about.

And while Akuto placed his things in his room, she whispered to Korone.

"How do you like this perfect plan? I am scaring the empress until she feels mentally trapped."

"I can see that," replied Korone. "But more importantly, is the story you just told true to the best of your knowledge?"

"Eh? Of course it's true."

"Understood. Keep up the good work on your plan."

Korone walked past Nozomi who was giving a confused look and she entered Akuto's room.

"I do not want to believe it, but this could become a problem. Be careful."

"She doesn't seem to be threatening us, but ghosts don't exist."

"Do not be so sure."

Korone's expression was quite serious. Then again, her expression was always serious.

"Now that looks like a threat."

"Not at all. Oh, we will all be eating in the large room. And feel free to visit the bath until then. We can carry out the investigation during the night. We will look through the inn and protect the Imperial Seal until morning. Then we will show it to the empress."

"Understood. Let's take it easy until we start investigating tonight."

The sun began to set and Akuto walked to the large bath on his own. The girls seemed to be busy changing, but the men's bath and women's bath were separate, so there was no need to head there together. Looking forward to being alone for the first time in a while, he peacefully opened the door to the changing room.

The changing room was clean but old. The baskets to put one's clothes in had a layer of fluff from years of use. Akuto did not believe in the paranormal, but he still sensed a gloomy air in the room.

"I feel bad saying it, but I can see why they don't get many guests."

He opened the door to the bath and found an open air bath of decent size. It was surrounded by trees, so no one would be able to see in from outside.

"I haven't been able to relax like this in a while."

He sank into the water and let out a relaxed sigh. The warmth wrapping around his body seemed to take away his weariness.

Meanwhile, someone hid in a tree right next to Akuto. Needless to say, it was Nozomi.

"Heh heh heh. If he's here in the men's bath, he can't immediately track me down if I mess with the women's bath."

While straddling a branch, she pulled a bottle from her pocket and grinned.

It contained a powder that turned red when dissolved in water. She could turn the women's bath into a lake of blood by scattering it from above.

"And the red conveniently returns to clear after a few minutes. After they scream and run away, they'll come back and wonder if they were imagining it or if it was something paranormal."

Because Akuto was in the bath, Nozomi averted her gaze and felt her heart beat a little faster as she waited for the girls to enter the women's bath. But an unexpected voice from below brought her gaze to Akuto.

"E-Etou-san! Why are you here!?"

Akuto could not be blamed for crying out in surprise. Fujiko had embraced him from behind while completely naked.

"Why else? Because I missed you, Akuto-sama."

Her voice could only be called bewitching.

"But this is the men's bath."

"There are no other guests. I even entered through the main entrance."

"Yes, but..."



"Oh, do you not like it? I hurried here before the others, so we do not have much time. Now, let us hurry up and get down to business."

"G-get down to business? What do you mean?"

The sight made Nozomi gulp as she watched on from above. She naturally had no experience with this kind of thing, so her heart beat so fast she thought it would burst from her chest. She knew she should not

watch, but her eyes were glued to the two of them.

"I think you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Yes, but we shouldn't do things like that."

"Oh? If you are referring to your religious doctrine, that no longer applies to you. And this is not a problem under standard ethics, so I will give you a healthy child."

Fujiko stroked Akuto's chest from behind and brought his hand to her chest.

"A child!? No, um... wait!"

"Ahh, I love you how you are usually so strong and yet so cute at times like this."

Akuto and Fujiko began to squirm about inside the bath.

By this point, Nozomi's blood had completely rushed to her head. Her eyes were glittering and she was breathing heavily.

—E-ee... Amazing... This is amazing enough, but what if it gets even more amazing? Wait. Why is my face wet? Oh, my nose is bleeding.

By the time she caught on, it was too late. The blood dripping from her

nose fell on Akuto and Fujiko.

"Wait, Etou-san. Something just fell on me."

"Heh heh. Do you really think you can trick me like that? Or are you embarrassed by what's going on down here? ...Huh? Blood?"

—Oh, no!

Nozomi thought about running, but it turned out she did not have to.

"Stop right there!"

She heard a shout and the sound of something being sliced.

She looked over just in time to see the bamboo divider between the men's and women's baths being sliced apart by a Japanese sword.

Junko then kicked it down from the women's side and appeared on the men's side.

"What do you think you're doing!?" she shouted, but she received oddly calm responses.

"Wait a second. This is blood," said Akuto.

"Wh-why is the water red?" asked Fujiko.

“Do you really think you can trick me like-... Hyaaaaaaah!”

Junko’s initially energetic voice changed to a scream.

—Eh? Isn’t that a bit much for a small nosebleed?

Nozomi looked away from Junko and towards the bath Akuto and Fujiko were in.

The entire bath was growing red.

—Ah. Don’t tell me I dropped the bottle.

She checked the bottle in her hand, but it was still closed, it had not broken, and it retained its contents.

“Th-then what is that?” she muttered.

Akuto and Fujiko put on towels and left the bath. The open-air bath was not that large, but it still contained dozens of times the water of a normal household bath. Disturbing red smoke was rising from about half of it.

“Wh-what is that? I-is it a real curse?”

Nozomi’s voice was trembling with fear.

"This is human blood," said Korone after testing the composition of the water.

They had called Nozomi's mother to get permission and have her check if anything was wrong, but they had only learned two things: it was human blood and it had been thrown into the bath from outside rather than entering through the hot water opening.

"Is this harassment from the group that was trying to buy up the land?" suggested Akuto.

"It would be difficult for them to accomplish this," said Korone with a shake of her head.

Akuto recalled that the Imperial Knights were secretly protecting the area.

"Then I don't know... J-just to be sure, this isn't one of your pranks, is it?"

"I do not blame you for suspecting me, but I did not do this. However, I was neglecting to monitor Nozomi-san's actions."

"Then it's possible she did this."

Akuto groaned with a sullen look, but Nozomi had vanished.

In the end, they all took turns using their rooms' indoor baths, changed

into yukatas, and ate dinner. Eating all the food kindly served by Nozomi's mother should have been an enjoyable experience, but their discussions naturally turned toward the paranormal.

"H-hey. There really is not anything going on here, is there?" asked Junko worriedly.

"You believe in that nonsense too much. It is entirely possible that Nozomi-san prepared a large quantity of human blood."

Fujiko teased Junko, but Fujiko's voice was less cheerful than usual.

"That actually scares me more. But it's real human blood, so someone had to have been there, right? Can you detect their mana?"

Yoshie turned toward Korone.

"I do not think a mana canceller was in effect, but I cannot detect anything. I do not know why."

Korone's words silenced them all.

"I am very sorry. That is where someone once had their head split open with a rock as they bathed," said Nozomi's mother as if that were an explanation.

All their expressions grew even heavier.

"Well... At any rate, let's think of this as an actual incident. Korone and I will search for Nozomi-san. The rest of you stay in the room. Does that sound good?"

Everyone agreed with Akuto's suggestion.

Once they had finished eating, Nozomi's mother left apologetically and Korone began making some tea. Akuto chose his words carefully in order to put the others at ease.

"I'm sure it was just a prank."

"I hope it was..." said Junko in a gloomy voice.

"Of course it was a prank," said Fujiko. "We have some kind of enemy and we are looking worried because it is creepy. You are the only one that actually believes in ghosts. How can you believe in ghosts in an age where almost all mysteries have been solved?"

Junko pouted her lips.

"My family's religion performs some traditional rituals and they include a belief in mysterious powers."

"That is a discrepancy created by mixing belief in such powers with a god who is nothing but a system. And Akuto-sama hates that, remember? Suhara was even the first god he destroyed."

"But!"

Junko and Fujiko were beginning to argue, so Akuto tried to cut in.

"Let's stop talking about this..."

"No, I view it a little differently."

But Yoshie spoke up and continued the discussion.

"How do you view it?"

"Most of the world's mysteries have been solved, but the problem of the soul has not been resolved. I have already proven that a soul exists separate from our body. And we do not know why that soul is created. You all remember that Zero actually had a soul, right?"

Yoshie began explaining her view.

"When L'Isle-Adams spend a long time with an individual, they gain a sense of self. If we equate a sense of self with a soul, it means that a soul can be transmitted. We are living in an unexpectedly mysterious world."

"I suppose I must agree with you about that."

As one of those involved, Fujiko had no choice but to concede the point.

"And that means souls can see souls. In which case, we might be able to see ghosts."

But when Yoshie brought her argument there, Fujiko argued back.

"But that has nothing to do with this incident. After all, human blood is a physical object."

"Well, yes. Even if it can be created with mana, it requires the original person's DNA and the proper chemical elements. It's best to assume someone was there. But I also want to agree with Junko-kun's opinion. Also, she's kind of cute when she's scared. Don't you think?"

Yoshie winked at Akuto.

"Oh...um...well... I suppose," he mumbled.

"Ah..."

Junko blushed and Fujiko immediately argued back.

"She is not cute!"

"Okay. Let's get going."

Akuto left along with Korone.

Junko and the others were left behind and they felt uneasy. Or more accurately, Junko felt uneasy.

"Th-they will be all right, won't they?"

Junko clung to Yoshie. She must not have noticed because she jumped when Yoshie began stroking her head.

"Oh, you really are cute. Good girl, good girl."

"S-stop that..."

"You're the one that grabbed on to me."

Yoshie stroked Junko's chin like she was a cat, but Junko could not move away and could only make ticklish complaints.

"Stop... no, stop!"

"Nyo, nyo, nyo. I'm gonna tickle you."

Junko was half in tears, but Yoshie intended to continue having fun.

Seeing them, Keena joined in.

"I'll do it too!"

Keena grabbed on to Junko and started petting her too.

"I said stop... Hey, that tickles!"

Junko struggled and the three of them collapsed while tangled together. They were all wearing yukatas which shifted out of place and created an immodest scene. Fujiko smiled bitterly and scolded them.

"Stop that. And it looks like Hattori-san has finally calmed down."

"Eh?"

Junko turned toward Fujiko.

"C'mon, don't say it like that. It makes it sound like I did it on purpose."

Yoshie smiled bitterly as well.

"I thought we were doing it because it was fun."

Keena was still tangled around Junko.

And then...

They heard a low, heavy creaking noise.

"Eh?"

They all froze in place and looked to the ceiling.

The creaking came from the ceiling joist.

It sounded like something heavy was hanging from the joist in the next room.

"Did someone hang themselves in the next room?"

Junko grabbed on to Yoshie once more.

This time, Yoshie was not about to play around.

"That sound is real, isn't it? In that case..."

"It would be faster to assume this is another prank!"

With a flip of her yukata hem, Fujiko charged out of the room.

She ran down the hallway and cautiously peeked into the next room while pressing her back against the wall.

And then she froze in place.

She saw the back of a girl with long hair. She had what looked like a white rope around her neck and her feet were floating in the air. She was swaying back and forth like a pendulum in time with the creaking.

"Enough pranks!"

Showing no fear, Fujiko immediately fired a mana sphere into the hanged girl.

She held back so as not to do any damage to the room. She was mainly trying to determine what this was.

A small explosion of light burst out and filled the room with light.

"This sensation..."

But the light sensation confused her.

"There was something there, wasn't there?"

Keena arrived and peered in the room from behind Fujiko.

"I saw it too. It looked like a hanged corpse.

Yoshie lined up alongside them as Junko clung to her chest.

"S-stop it... Was there really something there?"

"Yes. But it disappeared."

Fujiko shook her head.

After the explosion vanished, the room was perfectly calm and the only noise was the ticking of the clock.

"Eeeee! Then it was real?" cried Junko in fright.

"If we can't prove what it was, we can't call it a real anything. Look, it could have gone in and out as it pleased."

Fujiko entered the room and pointed at the ceiling. The ceiling panels were loose and could be easily removed. Leaving through the ceiling would not have been impossible.

"We should wait obediently in the room until Akuto-sama returns," said Fujiko.

After returning to the room, they sat around with serious expressions and speaking little.

"P-please say something..." begged Junko in a trembling voice.

"It is a little too gloomy in here." Yoshie folded her arms. "Not that I think I can feel cheerful right now."

"If this is an attack by someone, we should stay put unless they attack this room," said Fujiko calmly. "We need an escape route, but this place is so cheaply made that we can easily break through a window or even a wall. How about we calm down and drink some tea for now?"

"It would kind of be a relief to find out it really is a ghost," said Keena innocently.

Junko shook her head back and forth.

"No it would not! Not at all!"

"I have to side with Keena on this one," said Fujiko. "If this is someone targeting Keena, it may be too much for us. Or rather, I do not want that responsibility."

"If you get down to it, I guess I agree," said Yoshie. "But whether this is something physical or something spiritual, we're definitely in a strange place. Mana acts oddly here. I'd only ever heard rumors, but places like that are known as mystery zones. In those places, gravity acts oddly and things happen that drive people insane."

"There is no need to discuss that. We need to decide what to do in case there is a threat."

"Our only choice is to protect Keena and run away. If something

happens, we'll leave this mystery zone. That should be our priority."

Fujiko and Yoshie began to gain a sense of danger.

"B-but we won't fall victim to a deadly curse, will we?"

Junko had yet to let go of Yoshie.

"Well, if that happens, there isn't much we can do. There's no point in worrying about it."

"I still say a ghost would be fun," insisted Keena. "Ghosts turn invisible, make strange noises, and scare people, right?"

"You can do all of that yourself," said Fujiko in annoyance.

Keena pouted her lips.

"Eh? You shouldn't say people are like ghosts. ...Ah."

Keena stood up to complain further, but she dropped her empty teacup as she did.

"Oh, no. I dropped it."

She reached out an arm.

And a white hand came from under the table, picked up the teacup, and handed it to her.

"Th-thanks."

She returned the teacup to the table and started to speak again.

"As I was saying..."

But the others were completely motionless.

They all stared closely at their own hands.

They then stopped moving again, but a moment later Junko screamed and they raced to be the first out of the room.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"I cannot detect it very well, but from the voices and vibrations, there are several people inside the inn," said Korone.

Akuto and Korone were currently walking around the inn. They had yet to find Nozomi.

"But that can't be, can it?"

"Not counting Nozomi-san, the only workers at the inn are her parents and the single servant L'Isle-Adam. The couple is at the reception desk and the L'Isle-Adam is working in the garden."

"And you would receive a report if someone arrived from outside, right?"

"Yes. But I cannot currently receive telepathic communications. The mana is unstable. But if something did happen, the Imperial Knights would arrive to inform me directly."

"This doesn't make any sense. What is going on?"

Akuto looked at the box in his hand that contained the Imperial Seal. They had brought it from the basement, but it did not seem like anything more than a box containing an antique.

"At any rate, this is the only place Nozomi-san could be. The sealed room."

Korone pointed forward.

Akuto placed a hand on the door and found it was unlocked.

"It doesn't seem especially sealed to me."

"The knights performed their secret preliminary investigation, but they

said nothing about a sealed room.”

“If we don’t find Nozomi-san here, let’s head back to the room.”

Akuto entered the sealed room.

It looked a lot like a storeroom. The walls on either side were covered in shelves and the shelves were lined with antiques. Other than the large vase placed conspicuously in the back, nothing seemed particularly out of the ordinary. That might change if they investigated each individual antique, though.

“Is this the vase she was talking about?”

Akuto headed further in. The vase was about as tall as a child and it was white with a complex blue pattern. Akuto peered into it and drew back in surprise.

Nozomi was inside.

“What are you doing in there?”

“E-eeee! It’s here! Help me! Forgive me!”

She was in a state of confusion.

“Hey, just calm down.”

As soon as he said that, he heard a distant explosion. That was the mana sphere that Fujiko had fired, but he had no way of knowing that.

"We can deal with her later. We need to hurry back."

With that instruction to Korone, Akuto tried to return.

But Nozomi was clinging to his arm.

"Oh, thank goodness! You're human! Don't go! I-it's here! It's really here! Please help me! It's scary! It's too scary!"

"L-let go of me. You heard that explosion, didn't you?"

"Th-that's why you need to help me! There's a monster! A real monster!"

Nozomi was crying.

Akuto turned to Korone, but she was holding a hand to her ear.

"I hear Etou-san and the others speaking. It is a normal conversation. Everything appears to be okay."

"Hm? I don't think they would cause an explosion just for fun."

"Based on the conversation, they seem to have seen something."

"So it was a ghost or a monster?"

Akuto turned back to Nozomi.

She was clinging to him while crying.

"Like I said! There really is one! I saw a hairy monster! I'm sorry! I was lying before! But what happened here is true! I know you won't believe me, but there was a monster!"

Akuto could not make sense of what she was saying, but he could only assume she had seen something she did not expect to see.

"Well, it seems something is happening. That's for sure. Let's head back with her. We have the Imperial Seal, so we can contact the Imperial Knights."

As he spoke, Akuto lifted Nozomi out of the vase, left the sealed room, and checked his surroundings. The room was at the corner of an L-shaped turn of the hallway. When he looked down the narrow hallway to the right, a chill ran down his spine.

Standing at the end of the hallway were two small children with bobbed hair and wearing worn-out kimono undershirts. They had identical but differently-colored kimono undershirts, they had the same hairstyle, and their faces were equally well-featured, so they looked like twins. They said nothing and simply stared at him.

But Akuto managed to calm down and prepare himself. The twins then vanished down the hallway as if sliding.

"What was that?"

He turned toward Korone, but this time he saw Junko and the others screaming and running toward him.

"Waaaah! Help me, Akuto! I'm going to be killed!"

Junko clung to him.

"C-calm down. You aren't going to be killed!"

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders to calm her.

"That girl is too scared to be of any use," said Fujiko as she casually embraced him. "We need to be dealing with the actual threat right now."

"Hey, A-chan. Do you feel anything funny?" asked Keena as she grabbed onto his arm. "It feels kind of exciting!"

Keena was acting different from normal which increased his unease, but Yoshie pressed up against his back before he could say anything.

"Oh, sorry. Everyone was doing it, so I thought I would too."

"S-stop that... A-anyway, I understand, so calm down. If we are up against something with an actual form, we can do something about it."

He called out to all of them.

"All of them" being everyone clinging to him. Junko was in front, Fujiko was on his right arm, Keena was on the left, Yoshie was on his back, and Nozomi and Korone were clinging to either leg.

"Korone, it's pretty obvious you're doing that as a joke. ...And the rest of you, let go. Look, there's nothing-..."

As he spoke, Akuto pointed down the hall.

But there was something there.

It was a tall girl. Her hair was long enough to almost reach the ground. Her bangs hung straight down and completely hid her face. Her slender body was covered by a plain dress. The strangest part was her movement. The joints of her arms and legs moved like a spider or crab. Also, she even moved portions very close to the trunk of her body that one normally did not think about as having joints. Her shoulder blades and pelvis slid forward and back, left and right as she walked forward.

Yes, she was approaching Akuto and the girls.

Her creepy movement left Akuto speechless. When the others noticed

his reaction, they reflexively looked in the same direction.

“Waaaah!”

Even Fujiko and Yoshie screamed this time. Only Korone remained calm. Junko went beyond simply losing her composure.

“No! I am going to die from a curse! That is the legendary spirit told of by my family. My grandmother told me about it. That is the physical form of a curse that kills you with just a touch!”

“C-calm down. You’re a strong girl. You can cut down any enemy. So let’s just start by moving away a bit.”

The girl’s creepy appearance had made Akuto hesitate, but he had decided to act on the assumption she was an enemy.

But...

“What!? That is how you see me?”

Junko appeared to have received quite a shock, so Akuto frantically denied it.

“No, it isn’t. I know you’re actually sensitive and have all sorts of cute aspects to you. I’m just saying we need that strength right now.”

"Thanks. I am glad to hear that at the end."

"W-wait. What do you mean 'the end'?"

"Aren't we all about to die?"

"No, we aren't," denied Akuto, but Junko was staring off into the distance.

"You are only saying that so as not to worry us. But I love that kindness of yours. I can say it now. I know it is cowardly to only confess my feelings on the verge of death, but I can be honest now. I love you. I love you from the bottom of my heart. Please hold me until we die!"

Junko wrapped her arms tightly around Akuto.

"Wait... Um..."

Akuto blushed and was unsure what to say.

That had undeniably been a confession of love.

"Please... Please just tell me you love me!" shouted Junko.

She looked up at him while clinging to him.

Unsurprisingly, Fujiko could not remain silent after hearing that.

"Please stop joking! You are not the only one to love Akuto-sama! Why will you not return my love? Give us a clear answer now, Akuto-sama. Which one of us do you love?"

Fujiko also looked up at him while asking her question in a demanding tone.

"Why now...?"



"The time does not matter! This is an important issue!"

"Hm, if we're doing this, how about putting me in as a candidate?" said Yoshie.

"A-chan, I have a funny feeling in my chest. I want to know too!"

Keena also clung to him with a somehow desperate ring to her voice.

Akuto was bewildered and he glanced over toward the monster. She had already arrived quite close by.

"Gogagagagegigagagigogogogogo..."

She spoke as if her throat had been crushed as she approached.

"Okay, fine! I'll do it." He began to speak with a serious expression. "It isn't that I've been indecisive. As you know, I am a special existence. For that reason, the one I should be with is Keena."

The group froze in shock when they heard that.

"But if you want my honest opinion, I love all of you. The story of loving a single person is another illusion. I want to respond to all of your feelings. I am still an unstable existence and I haven't decided what my future will be yet. But once I decide how I will live my life, I will definitely live for all of your sakes. That is my answer."

Akuto spoke decisively.

"That goes beyond indecisive..."

"It sounded like he was saying he would make all of us his..."

"Oh? I'm fine with that."

"A-chan, I still have a funny feeling in my chest."

As they all muttered their thoughts, their expression relaxed as if the venom had been removed.

"Anyway, that is how I truly feel."

Akuto was confused by the odd atmosphere.

But they were not the only ones who were confused.

"Guga..."

The monster's cheeks flushed as if she were embarrassed. She lifted her hair to reveal her face and she – Arnoul – placed her hands on her cheeks.

"I'm not sure what to say when faced with a romantic scene like that, arinsu."

Ootake Michie appeared and her cheeks were also flushed.

"Ahh, ahh. This is what happens when we scare someone who wasn't a target, gya."

Kamiyama Kanna also walked down the hallway.

The three student council officers were all gathered.

"H-h-huh?"

Junko frantically looked between the three of them in confusion.

The others were also surprised to varying degrees.

"Was this all the student council's doing?" asked Akuto.

Michie nodded.

"That's right, arinsu. But in our defense, we didn't know you all would be here, arinsu. Or rather, we didn't when we were putting together our plan, arinsu."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"After the previous incident, we became friends with the L'Isle-Adam here named Monami and we came to play with her, gya," said Kanna. "We

heard Nozomi was planning something odd, so we thought we would give her a scare instead, gya."

"Then the blood in the bath was you?" asked Fujiko.

Michie embarrassedly brought her hands to her cheeks.

"I was hiding there and I got a nosebleed when I saw your immodest behavior, arinsu."

"Wasn't that a little much for a nosebleed?"

"I have a special condition that lets me create blood indefinitely as long as I have the nutrients, arinsu. I must eat red things to keep it up, though, arinsu."

"Y'know..."

Fujiko could not believe what she was hearing.

"Then the hanged girl and that last thing was you too?" asked Yoshie.

Arnoul nodded.

"Guga."

"Then what about that hand?" asked Akuto.

A voice responded from the hallway to the right.

"When I heard about this from them, I thought it sounded like fun. And thanks to that interesting scene just now, it was even more fun than I expected. That's the problem with a lady killer like you."

Student Council President Lily Shiraishi approached while grinning. Walking next to her were two children wearing kimono undershirts: Monami and Keisu.

"Now Nozomi can't act so superior all the time."

"Boss, I made a friend who has Japanese clothes that fit me!"

Monami and Keisu waved happily.

"But I thought no one could approach because of the Imperial Knights," said Akuto.

Lily shrugged.

"They're really full of themselves and they don't know me, so a few of them tried to attack me. If they were friends of yours, you should've said so."

"I wouldn't say they're friends, but they're the Imperial Knights."

"Who cares about the details? Now, how about you use that open-air bath. I think there are a few girls here who want to wash your back for you."

Lily grinned cruelly.

Junko had remained oddly silent, but she started speaking in a bitter voice.

"I...I...I..."

"Are you okay?"

Akuto placed a worried hand on her shoulder.

But she suddenly brushed it off.

"I...I...I confessed..."

Her shoulders trembled as she squeezed out her voice. And then she started shouting.

"I confessed! And in front of everyone!"

She blushed and began flailing her limbs around, but everyone responded coldly.

"Are you an idiot? Everyone already knows that."

"And what's wrong with it? Your confession was a success."

"And since it succeeded, shouldn't you be thanking your upperclassman instead of getting angry?" complained Lily.

"Waaah! This is too embarrassing! This is all your fault!"

Junko seemed to try to punch Akuto or something similar because she waved her hand around and toppled in an odd direction.

"W-watch out."

He tried to support her, but she tumbled into one of the antique-filled shelves in the sealed room.

A loud crash filled the late-night inn and an even more delicate atmosphere surrounded the group.

"Ahh, ahh. That ruined the mood."

"Honestly, what was that? The student council isn't paying for it."

Fujiko and Lily, the upperclassmen, gave their respective complaints.

Korone then spoke up after noticing something.

"But one problem has not been resolved: the mana abnormality."

"Did you detect something?" asked Akuto.

Korone nodded and pointed down the hallway.

Everyone looked in that direction.

A woman wearing white stood there. Her long hair and slender body were the same as Arnoul's, but she had a noble air about her that Arnoul had lacked.

But there was an even greater difference.

"Hey, who is that?"

"I don't know, gya."

"Do any of you?"

Lily asked Akuto that, but he shook his head.

"What even is it?"

"It is not human," declared Korone. "I also cannot hear a heartbeat or any mechanical noises."

Hearing that, Lily gave a snort.

"Hmph. Stop right there. I know you're made from mana."

She extended an arm toward the woman and tried to grab her shoulder, but her hand only reached empty air.

"Eh?"

When her hand passed right through the woman's body, even Lily's eyes opened wide.

"That isn't mana..."

She extended her hand toward the woman a few more times, but the woman walked forward as if that hand was not there. But "walk" might not have been the best term as her legs were not moving. She was sliding forward while standing straight.

"Don't tell me this one is real," shrieked Junko.

Her hips gave out and she crawled over to cling to Akuto's leg.

Akuto placed a hand on her head.

"But I don't see any ill intent."

True enough, the woman's air of nobility remained even as she approached. Her slightly narrowed eyes glowed as if trying to say something.

And then Korone spoke.

"Her appearance has allowed me to locate the center of the mana abnormality. It is one of the antiques on the shelf Hattori-san knocked over. That appears to be the source."

"That is?"

Junko stood up in surprise and turned toward the antiques she had knocked over.

A wooden box had opened and a small wooden branch that glowed gold could be seen inside. It looked like a normal decoration at first, but it emitted a light different from mana. It was the same light that came from the approaching woman.

"Eh!?" shouted Akuto.

A similar glow came from the small box he held. In other words, the Imperial Seal was emitting light.

“Wh-what?”

Junko turned toward Korone to demand an explanation.

Korone shook her head.

“I do not know. This may be a secret of a former emperor.”

Nozomi was trembling in fear and clinging to Akuto’s leg, but Korone took her hand and stood her up.

“Fweh? Wh-wh-what are you doing?”

Nozomi looked confused as the light from the Imperial Seal and small branch reflected from her forehead.

“Your family does not contain imperial blood. But it has likely been following an order made by an emperor. Your unexplainable bad luck may be the power of the Imperial Seal or this small branch. It may be a means of preventing anyone from finding them.”

As Korone explained, Nozomi’s eyes opened wide.

“Then we were a family that served the imperial family?”

Nozomi’s voice trembled and tears gushed forth as if washing away all of her previous worries.

"Well, I guess this is a happy ending. But what happens to her now?"

Akuto turned to Keena.

"I don't really know. But she's supposed to serve the empress," she said.

As if in response, the glowing woman spoke.

"Bearer of the Imperial Seal, the preparations are complete. For the creation of the true empire, return the Jewel Branch of Hourai to its rightful place."

No one was able to say anything in response.

Except for Keena, that is. She tugged on Akuto's sleeve and pouted her lips.

"Hey, A-chan. I told you I had a funny feeling in my chest."

Afterword

Thank you once again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

We have already reached double digits with Volume 10. This one was a collection of short stories, so I think it should be easygoing and enjoyable. I made this volume so you can read it on its own, so you can enjoy it if you learned about the series from the anime but do not want to buy all ten volumes. As for the story...well, you can see for yourself. If I had to explain it, I would say it is the three student council officers' first time in the spotlight. Seeing them with voices in the anime made me realize I needed to write this.

Now, about the anime. It finished airing while remaining popular. The story of the original novels remained intact and they did a wonderful job that presented things in many challenging ways. The voice actors all did an amazing job and were really onboard with their performances. The DVDs and BDs are on sale now. Whether you saw it or missed it, please go buy all of them. It is an excellent product that makes it well worth searching out every volume.

There is a reason I talked about the anime before talking about the contents of this volume. There is a special mini anime named "Another Bonus Demon King" that I gave some ideas for and I used some of that material in this volume. I hope you felt the same atmosphere of humorous short stories in both. I watched the recording for the mini anime and the voice actors' wonderfully over-the-top performances made it even funnier. Make sure to watch it.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone involved and of course all of you readers. As you can see from what happened in this volume, the story will be continuing a little more. And when I say "a little more" I mean it in the same way they do in a weekly manga. Anyway, please continue reading from here on. It looks like there is plenty more to enjoy!



いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT11
水城正太郎



み01-02-11

水城正太郎

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT11

HJ文庫

HOBBY
JAPAN



すると、それに応えるかのように、新たな魔王は
恍惚として見えない空に向けて両手を広げた。
「これは……すごいね。見える。
みんなの記録が、わかる」





「その……うまく言えないけど」

阿九斗はけーなの髪に顔をうずめるようにして耳元に口を寄せた。

「う……うん」

登場人物紹介

はっとりじゅんこ
服部 絢子

阿九斗に対する忍心は強まる一方の、純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

えとうふじこ
江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。

きいあくど
紗伊 阿九斗

けーなの支配下に置かれることで何とか社会復帰。しかし彼の人生に平穩は訪れない……？

そが
曾我 けーな

日本の現皇帝陛下。世界の力ぎを握る存在、なのだろうか？

みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行っていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。



しらいし
リロイ白石

小粋な帽子がトレード
マークの生徒会長。喧
嘩っ早く「小さい」と言
われると切れてしまう。

おおたけみ ち え
大竹美智恵

蝙蝠の群れに変身
できる生徒会副会長。
語尾は「ありんす」

アルヌール

長身のリラダンにし
て生徒会書記。基本
「ぐが」としか言わ
ない。

かみやま
神山カンナ

狼に変身する能力を
持つ生徒会会計の
神山カンナ。語尾は
「ぎゃ」。



き た よ し え
木多淑恵

魔王戦争の一因を作っ
てしまったが、阿九斗のこ
とを気に入る、その後は
協力する。今は何となく
学院に居ついている。

けいす

初代魔王ゼロと共に仮想
空間内にいた小柄なリラ
ダンの少女。役目は無くな
ってしまったが、何となく
淑恵の元に留まっている。

Prologue

A room contained an antique leather chair and a table that showed off the rings of the tree it was made from. But the room had no furnishings besides the desk, the chair, and the abstract painting on the wall.

The room was located in the center of the imperial capital and the palace was visible from the window. Some strange people were gathered inside.

Mask-like objects hid some of their faces, but their silhouettes were very strange looking. On the other hand, those who left their faces exposed had well-featured faces. Everyone in the group seemed to draw the eye in some way or another.

"If the Jewel Branch of Hourai's seal has been broken, those with imperial blood will gather in the empire."

One of them spoke. His appearance was well suited for his behavior which was showy to the point of seeming sarcastic. His name was Kurahashi Kento. He was a member of CIMO 8 and he had the greatest brains and abilities of the group. His codename was USD, he was rumored to have the greatest intellect of the human race, and he was the one member who did not hide his identity.

"Whoever those people may be, I want to make it clear that we will ultimately ally with the current empress."

Kento looked around at the other members in search of agreement.

It was clear he had the most influence of the group. But one voice did rise in argument.

"You always jump right to the conclusion. For one thing, the government can't interfere with the empress. And isn't CIMO 8 a group of individualists?"

None of the people there were moving their mouths, but the voice was definitely there.

Kento replied without a hint of confusion.

"And as individualists, we were forced to join together for our original objective. And that original objective is of course what Yamato Bouichirou wanted. And that is..."

The voice from nowhere finished Kento's sentence as if to say it understood.

"To appease the extra-universal beings. And if that fails, to fight and defeat them."

The voice then added its own thought.

"I think our chances of appeasing them are greater."

"I hope you are right," said Kento coldly as he looked down at his feet.

A large dog was curled up there. It had long hair, so its eyes and drooping ears were almost completely buried below the fur. If it had not moved, it would have looked like a large mop.

The dog languidly raised its head, looked up at Kento, and moved its mouth.

"Are you saying you can't believe me when I say the chances are good?"

The movements of its mouth did indeed match the voice.

Kento accepted it as normal, shook his head, and spoke as candidly as if speaking to an old friend.

"Even if you were one of them, you can't know for sure."

"It is true I do not represent them."

The dog spoke to indicate he was a part of "them". His codename was The One and he was a rare talking dog. However, his true identity was not the dog.

"You are the only human in this world who is from 'there', so you don't get to say you don't represent them."

Kento's calm voice sounded slightly disagreeable.

The One bared his canine teeth to form a sarcastic smile.

"That's another way to think about it. Then again, I betrayed them."

A strange tension filled the air between them.

But a girl's voice broke through that atmosphere.

"Kento, One, you always end up like this when you meet. Anyway, what are we supposed to do?"

The girl casually placed a hand on the side of her head and tilted her head, but she had a strangely bewitching aura to her. Kento and The One lowered their shoulders in disappointment.

"Kei, we will be protecting the current empress as a group," said Kento as a warning.

The girl named Kei placed a hand on her chin and looked upwards.

"Hmm, but we aren't the ones to decide if the empress is up to the task. That demon king has the empress on his side, right? Doesn't that make us enemies of the empress?"

"But only the empress can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai and we need the power that has awoken. That is most likely the only power that can oppose the extra-universal beings."

"Then it doesn't matter who the empress is. We just want to use that power, right?"

Kei leaned back in her chair as if sulking and she clasped her hands behind her head.

"Yes, but the empress makes that power usable. And yet we only need the power. That creates a contradiction. In other words, we must explain our reasoning to the empress and have her obey us."

Kei's expression made it clear she did not quite understand.

"Do you really think that'll work? Would that demon king really listen to us?"

"From what I have seen of his personality, that should not be a problem. He fears the destruction of the imperial citizens' lives. That means our reasoning can reach him. Or we could take an innocent hostage. Either way, preserving the current regime is important."

"Does that mean we'll be ending the plan for me to replace him?" asked Kei as she leaned back in her chair and let her legs dangle down.

"That is a dangerous plan, so I want to avoid it if possible. You are our trump card. Listen carefully about what I tell you to do and do not take any careless actions."

Kento's tone was slightly different from before. It sounded like he was worried about Kei and like there was hidden meaning to his words.

Kei returned her chair to normal and sat up.

"Understood. If you say so, that must be the case."

"That's right, Kei."

Kento smiled at her and she seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right. Weren't we supposed to use our codenames here? You shouldn't call me Kei, USD. People will think there's something between us. Even if we're both guys."

Kei smiled.

Kento gave an uncertain look.

"You failed to use my codename first, Esper."

"Really? And I was trying to keep a decent division between my private life and work. Right, Kento?"

Kei gave a suggestive look to Kento.

"Please stop that. People will think there is something between us."

Kento shook his head, but Kei gave another suggestive look.

"And what's wrong with that? Also, it's important for coworkers to get along. Don't you think The One is prepared to betray us? After all, if he allies with another imperial candidate and that candidate gets ahold of the Jewel Branch of Hourai, using its power would be easy."

Kei looked across the different members.

Kento cleared his throat and The One spoke up.

"Ha ha ha! Esper, the way you act as if you really can read people's minds is your one real flaw."

"But," began Kei with a smile back. "My special intuition is quite good. I work for Kento and I will do anything for him. Hey, One. No betraying us, okay?"

The One gave an obviously faked shiver.

"There is no place for me except for here. Working to prevent the destruction of mankind is my only choice."

"Let's stop talking about that," cut in Kento. "Either way, mankind is about to experience the greatest threat it has ever faced."

Chapter 1: Gather, Emperors!

The many wrinkles on an old knight's face grew even deeper in exhaustion.

His name was Yuuki Jouji. He was the Imperial Knights' oldest veteran and one of the oldest people in an age of long lifespans.

But even he had never before seen someone like the person he faced now.

And that person was the empress.

"We all have imperial blood, so how about we just get along? If we eat rice together, we'll get along just fine. Yes, we can just line up and eat. We'll move the chopsticks at the same pace. One, two, one, two. If we mindlessly bring the rice to our mouths, all unpleasant thoughts will leave is."

The current empress was named Soga Keena and what she was saying was too much to even be called naïve.

"Your Majesty."

Jouji refrained from raising his voice and quietly admonished her.

"What is it?"

"Are you suggesting holding a banquet?"

"No, we'll just eat white rice. A banquet normally has a full course meal, right? That won't let us get along."

Keena's eyes sparkled as she explained her delusion.

Jouji cleared his throat.

"You will have the imperial candidates eat white rice? Nothing but white rice?"

"Yeah. Sounds amazing, doesn't it!?"

"This may be presumptuous of me..."

He looked like he was undergoing torture.

"But I doubt eating nothing but white rice will allow you to get along. It might even do the exact opposite."

"Really?" Keena sounded disappointed, but she quickly clapped her hands together in realization. "I know! If we all take a nap together..."

"Your Majesty."

"What is it?"

"This may be extremely presumptuous of me, but are you sure you understand what I am saying?"

"I do. Don't worry. Because the Jewel Branch of Hourai's seal has been broken, those with imperial blood are gathering. And the Jewel Branch of Hourai is the key to breaking the seal on an even greater power, so I need to be careful."

Her explanation was simple, but it did not exactly cover the most important points. However, Jouji himself was not all that knowledgeable about the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

"According to legend, the Jewel Branch of Hourai will choose the true emperor. And the true emperor will revive the Formless Power and guide the people"

This legend had been passed down within the empire.

Legends tended to be created in less advanced societies, but the empire was an exception. Before it had developed a magical society, it had been a scientific society for over a thousand years. In other words, legends were not superstition; they were based in information hidden for some reason and the rumors had developed into legends.

"What's the Formless Power?"

"A power with no known shape. I believe it merely means it is not known what the power is used for," explained Jouji.

"Does it matter if we don't know? I thought the current problem was the people with imperial blood gathering," asked Keena.

Jouji nodded and displayed a map on a mana screen. The island nation at the center of the empire and a large stretch of territory on the continent were colored red. He pointed at the southern end of that territory and began his explanation in a serious tone.

"While you are an exception, those who have imperial blood have lost some sort of struggle for power in the past. That means most of them will be arriving with revenge in their hearts. For example, we believe there is someone with imperial blood in this region, but that region was sealed off for a good reason."

A young Imperial Knight suddenly ran into the room.

"Something is happening at Constant Magic Academy!"

"You are in the presence of Her Majesty. Do not burst into the room like that."

After Jouji's scolding, the young knight fixed his posture.

"My apologies. Something is happening at Constant Magic Academy. The academy has-..."

He began to explain, but trailed off while still standing at attention.

"What is it? It is rude to end in the middle of a sentence. The current empress may be kind, but your discipline has grown much too lax."

Jouji began a lecture, but the young knight shook his head.

"My apologies, commander, but..."

"What is it? Stop interrupting me!"

"Yes, but..."

The young knight showed restraint in front of his angry commander, but he managed to point behind the old man.

"Her Majesty has escaped again."

"What?"

Jouji turned around and found Keena's clothes lying abandoned on the ground. That of course included her underwear.

"I have worked as an Imperial Knight for over a century and no emperor or empress has been more exhausting."

Jouji began to weep in anguish, but the young knight gave a troubled shrug and decided to give his report.

“Constant Magic Academy has been overrun by rapidly-growing plants. It is believed to be the magic of the god Aff, but this much power would require a large-scale attack with several spell users controlling the mana.”

Jouji looked taken aback.

“This is the magic of the region I was just talking about!”

He turned to where Keena had been, realized the foolishness of his reflexive action, and turned back to the young knight.

“Um... Okay. Contact the academy right away. This must be an invasion by the Merlai!”

The students of Constant Magic Academy had been driven out of the school buildings, past even the schoolyard, and into the outer territory owned by the academy. The teachers and students stood idly on the small hill which had held the imperial troops during the war with the demon king.

“This is definitely magic of the god Aff, so it isn’t exactly a mystery,” muttered Torii Mitsuko-sensei.

“Yeah, that magic lets you accelerate the growth of plants,” said Kita Yoshie who usually remained in a lab underneath the school. She lifted up her goggles which were filled with analysis devices and rubbed her eyes. “But I don’t want to imagine how much energy it would take to do it

on such a large scale.”

The school building was enveloped in green. No, that did not quite do the situation justice. The school building had fallen into a complete jungle. Tall trees leaned against it and branches and ivy flowed from all of the windows. It looked like some ruins after being abandoned for centuries.

Aff aided his believers in agriculture and the fishery industries. This magic to accelerate the growth of plants was meant to increase the production of food. Plants altered by mana would grow at several times the normal rate by absorbing water and nutrients from the ground.

But the faster the growth and the more plants being used, the harder it was to control the mana. And this incident was a little too large-scale. It went beyond difficult and reached a level almost impossible for a human.

“Is this being done by multiple people? But there were no signs of anyone infiltrating the area.”

Mitsuko-sensei crossed her arms.

“If one person is doing this, their power must rival the demon king’s,” said Yoshie as she turned toward Sai Akuto.

When Akuto noticed, he shrugged.

“Don’t ask me. All I know is this probably won’t be settled peaceably.”

The other students began to focus on him too.

This was to be expected. Most of the recent trouble in the school had been related to him. And this incident was much more bizarre than most. The academy had fallen into a jungle overnight.

Akuto did not know what was going on either, but he too suspected it was somehow related to him. Not only did he suspect it, he had resigned himself to the fact that it probably was. He had grown so accustomed to these commotions that he had learned passively letting things happen was less stressful than insisting he had nothing to do with it and regretting it later.

"I'll go look into it. I'm sure it's dangerous inside."

A normal person would have hesitated, but he started toward the school building as easily as taking a stroll.

"He does not sense any danger to himself even in a situation as strange as this. How reliable," said Etou Fujiko as if in a trance.

Even for someone as devoted as her, this was putting it too kindly. And Hattori Junko could not help but point that out.

"I am not sure reliable is the right word. It is more like he lives in an entirely different world from us. No normal person could walk calmly into such a strange place."

But Fujiko gave a scornful laugh.

"Heh. Then why not leave him forever. If you cannot keep up with him, you should not have confessed your love to him."

"Wha-...?"

Junko had previously ended up confessing to Akuto in the Sasahara inn and she had even received a much too straightforward answer. Just remembering it made her want to scream and run away.

"B-but he said he loved all of us, so it did not have any real meaning..."

She grew flustered, so Fujiko became triumphant.

"Honestly, you are hopeless. We must all do the best we can to be his women."

"H-his women!?"

"Heh. Are you that oblivious? And you have no use other than in a straight fight, so it is your duty to go with him at times like this."

That made Junko begin seriously worrying.

"Uuh... Y-you might be right. But right now, I think I would only get in his way. I cannot allow that. I need to get stronger."

Mitsuko-sensei then clapped her hands and interrupted.

“Okay, okay. Enough silliness. Only Sai-kun needs to go. Unlike before, this is trouble at school, so you have to do what I tell you. This is dangerous, so only he will be going. The rest of you can give him advice after he gives a report on the situation.”

She then turned to Yoshie.

“That’s what we’ve decided. Can you hear me, Akuto-kun?”

With a sidelong glance at Mitsuko-sensei, Yoshie telepathically contacted Akuto.

<I can hear you. There doesn’t seem to be any kind of jamming.>

Akuto telepathically replied after having travelled a fair bit already.

“Ah, no fair! I should have been the one to contact him!”

Fujiko leaned on Yoshie’s back and tried to cut into the conversation by pressing her face against the goggles. Yoshie almost fell forward, but she managed to stand her ground.

“Mghh... If you want to contact him, use your student handbook. And he should be able to pick up multiple conversations without a specialized device.”

"Oh, you're right. Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko moved away and began her own telepathic conversation, but this time someone leaned up against her to cut in.

"Mgyah!"

She groaned as Korone leaned limply against her.

"I have information from the palace. It seems related to this incident," she sent to Akuto.

"Y-you're too heavy..."

"It is about a tribe known as the Merlai." Korone continued calmly while ignoring Fujiko's complaints. "The Merlai have a strange history. They live in a deep jungle on an island to the south. It is part of the empire, but its existence is kept secret and the area is known as unexplored. And it seems the first tribe leader had imperial blood."

"What? I've never heard of that," said Yoshie.

"What kind of nonsense is this?"

Fujiko was half protesting and half surprised while Korone needlessly leaned against her.

"And most surprisingly of all, it was originally a theme park."

<And most surprisingly of all, it was originally a theme park.>

Korone's voice filled Akuto's head as he approached the school building.

He could no longer continue without treading on underbrush and other plants. This had originally been the area in front of the dining hall, but it now looked like an unexplored jungle.

"A theme park?" he asked.

Korone continued her explanation.

<Yes. During the early days of the empire, a project began to turn that southern island into a theme park, but the project was never completed. Why is unknown, but there must be some great secret as the reason is being hidden.>

"Hidden? So no data remains?"

<Correct. This information comes from the memories of a veteran Imperial Knight who knows a lot about the imperial family. That means this great secret must be a connection between the theme park and someone in the imperial family.>

"But it's just a theme park."

<This would mean it is not just a theme park. The rumor is that a member of the imperial family grew so hooked on the jungle theme park that he never returned. He named himself the leader of the Merlai tribe and began living like a true savage.>

"That just sounds like a joke to me."

Akuto looked around and realized that story had filled the jungle scene around him with a sense of madness.

<It was probably not until a situation like this occurred that it became clear it was more than just a theme park. Please be careful. Who knows what lurks in that jungle.>

"I know that, but there's not much I can do," he muttered.

—Can someone really take a theme park that seriously?

That bothered him. Based on the situation, it seemed this was caused by those calling themselves the Merlai, but that would require believing that rumor.

—But if that isn't what's happening, why is this happening?

He parted some branches, found the school building's entrance, and entered. He decided to head toward the highest point. If this was

manmade, the highest point or the central point would be the most important. Humans could not relax otherwise.

The building's floor had been broken in places by trees growing up, which spoke volumes about how powerful these trees were.

He checked around and climbed the stairs. On his way to the top floor, he saw no signs of someone altering the surrounding plants. That would mean no one entered the area after the trees had grown in.

"With this floor, I'll have checked the entire building."

The top floor lounge had a glass ceiling. With the green jungle filling it, it looked like a greenhouse at a botanical garden. The air was filled with warmth and calming aromas. The morning sun shone in at an angle, but the thick layer of leaves blocked it out just enough to create a soothing curtain of light on the floor. If one ignored how the plants had appeared, it seemed perfect for sitting around with a cold drink.

But the voice Akuto heard as soon as he set foot in the lounge was enough to return the tension to his loosening cheeks.

"Are you strong?" asked a high-pitched voice.

"Who are you?"

He spoke toward the center of the lounge because he was unsure where the voice had come from.

"I'm asking the questions here. ...But it looks like I don't need to. You are strong."

The voice echoed throughout the entire lounge, making it unclear where it was coming from.

—Why can't I sense their mana?

He searched for a presence, but he only sensed a static-like mana wave from every direction. It seemed the trees filling the lounge gave off a certain mana wave that was very similar to the speaker's mana waves.

—It's like they've become one with the trees.

That seemed to be why the person had filled the area with trees.

As Akuto took a defensive stance, the voice called out again.

"The Jewel Branch of Hourai called me here! You aren't the empress. I, Nonimora, have business with the empress! Call her here!"

It seemed this person was named Nonimora. Based on what she was saying, it seemed she was exactly who they had predicted she was. Akuto had a bad feeling that she was the type who really did believe a theme park was real.

"The empress is not here. If you wish to negotiate, you must go through

the proper procedures.”

He wanted to see how she would react to this.

He received response, but it was not what he had expected.

“You are the ones who aren’t going through the proper procedures! The Jewel Branch of Hourai will choose the true emperor! The different imperial candidates must compete to see who comes out on top!”

—Do they know what they’re doing here?

Her response had been unexpected, but his words were getting through to her.

“When you say ‘compete’, do you mean fight?”

“This is the problem with the people of the main island! Stop being so brutal! We compete in order to reach mutual approval. It doesn’t matter if its zutan-zutan or mosa-mosa!”

“Z-zutan-zutan?”

Akuto was confused, but he received an immediate reply.

“Zutan-zutan is zutan-zutan. What’s so hard to understand?”

"Well... All of it?"

"Don't tell me you don't know what mosa-mosa is either."

"Does it have to do with a hairy person?"

"Why in the world would it!? Fine! We can go with totechite-tetechite."

"I'm not sure what that is either. And what do I have to do with this competition?"

"Oh, you're right. Then go bring the empress here."

"The people of this country didn't even know the Jewel Branch of Hourai existed, so I'm not sure what to think of your claim. It would help if you spoke with the palace first."

Akuto spoke the whole truth.

He felt he could trust this person a bit. Or rather, her tone of voice and comments showed she liked to keep things straight and to the point.

But that side of her turned out to be even greater than he thought.

"That's too much effort! You have a connection to the empress, don't you? I sense powerful mana. More powerful than a normal person."

“Well, I suppose I do have a connection...”

“Out with it! No one but the empress could be as powerful as you! Tell me this: is the empress even more powerful than you?”

“Well...” He pictured Keena’s face in his mind. “I’m certainly no match for her.”

“Amazing!”

Nonimora’s tone grew cheerful and lively.

“Then let’s do totechite-totechite!”

“What exactly is totechite-totechite?”

“It’s totechite-totechite. The rules say you can run wherever you want and whoever touches the other with both hands first wins!”

Nonimora’s last word flew through the air and her body likely did as well.

Akuto sensed a presence behind him, so he jumped forward. A broken tree branch landed in the spot he had been in.

—Hm?

He sensed something and leaped to the right. He felt a wind to the left and someone ran right past him.

"Ohhhh! You avoided me!"

She sounded delighted that he had avoided her.

Akuto looked over, but she was already gone.

"You sure are fast."

He searched for her presence again, but he could only detect the same waves all around him. The only motion he could find was the rustling of the leaves.

—!

He felt wind and leaped without even looking. He saw a brown shadow pass by out of the corner of his eye.

"You avoided me again!" she delightedly shouted once more.

—Um... What am I doing?

The situation confused him. He tried to establish a telepathic connection, but failed. There was no jamming, but the mana waves emitted by the trees created too much static.

—I just have to grab them, right?

After reaching that conclusion, he spoke up without knowing where she was.

"Can I use magic?"

"Go right ahead!" replied Nonimora.

"In that case..."



Without worrying about her movements, he casually swung his arms apart. The movement whipped up an intense current of mana.

"Ohhhh?" cried Nonimora in surprise.

A spiraling torrent of mana appeared around Akuto. The trees began to bend and creak. They seemed to have flexible trunks, but this was still bringing them to their limits. A few seconds after the wind began, they twisted and fell over. After the cracking noises settled down, the wind grew still and the floor was covered in a spiral of felled trees. It looked like the site where a group of giants had an exciting folk dance.

"Oh, my!"

A small child stood amid it all.

Even from a distance, her brown skin and large clear eyes were noticeable. Her appearance surpassed gender and reached a position that anyone would view favorably. She was childish and could be seen as either a boy or a girl.

She wore rough clothes. They were made of wonderfully decorated leather and covered in large jewels, so her outfit looked both simple and noble.

Akuto looked at her suspiciously and shook his head.

"Will you stop now?"

But she shook her arms in anger.

"No! I need to punish you for not taking care of nature!"

Akuto frowned.

"Nature? You used magic to make all this grow here overnight. How is that natural?"

"Ohhhhh! You piss me off! You main islanders are always like this! You always make fun of our desire to protect nature!"

Nonimora began exaggeratedly stomping on the floor.

That direct representation of her anger amused Akuto, but he could not accept what she was saying.

"These plants were altered with mana and you were controlling their growth. You can't call that natural."

"Why must you make fun of me like that!? You stupid main islanders! How much do you even know about us Merlai!?"

"Rumor has it you believed a theme park was a real jungle and started living there."

"That's fine and all, but we don't believe it's real. We know the trees are the same as what you call buildings!"

"Eh? Then why?"

Akuto had not expected that answer. In the empire, magic was just a social system yet it had been turned into a religion. Only the priests and certain intellectuals used it while aware it was a system. Even though all the information was publicly available, the normal people fully accepted the religious dogma in their lives. Were the Merlai doing the same thing?

"Are you saying only the leaders like you know the truth and are deceiving the normal people?"

"Mkiii! Don't make fun of us! Everyone knows! Kids learn about history in school!"

"Then...what do you mean?"

"Science and everyday life are two different things. Living like an animal is for the best. You have all the food you need, you don't get sick, and you live convenient lives, but you don't think you're happy. That's because you aren't having fun with life. That's why the Merlai got rid of all those precepts. The theme park was just an opportunity for that."

"Really?"

Akuto was dumbfounded. He was surprisingly shocked. The empire was vast and it constituted the entire world to him, so this was the first time he had felt like he was contacting something foreign. Also, Nonimora was unexpectedly intellectual and her way of thinking was similar to his own which this country treated as heretical.

"Do you get it now?"

Nonimora bent her small body back to puff out her chest.

Akuto smiled and nodded.

"It does seem I was mistaken and I apologize for that. After speaking with you, I would like to know a bit more about where you live."

When she saw the look on his face, her already large eyes opened even wider.

"Ohh, so you understand!? Then let's continue the totechite-totechite!"

"Fine, but you won't get anything from defeating me."

Despite his warning, she gave a deep nod.

"Not a problem. I just think it's fun!"

She prepared to continue, but then a voice reached them from above.

"A-chan!"

She was invisible, but Keena was definitely descending from the sky. Akuto looked up and his coat was swiped from behind.

Before he could try to put it on her, Keena wrapped his coat over her shoulders and appeared.

"If you're just going to make your presence known, why even strip in the first place?" he asked in exasperation.

Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"If I don't, I can't escape the palace."

"The palace!?" Nonimora reacted to their conversation. "Does that mean you're the empress?"

She seemed to have oddly good instincts because she quickly caught on that Keena was the empress. Most people would have assumed otherwise upon seeing her.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Keena looked puzzled.

Akuto wondered if he could have done a better job of hiding Keena's identity, but he realized that was near hopeless with those two involved.

"We were just talking about that. This is Nonimora of the Merlai who is apparently an imperial candidate."

"I see."

Keena looked at Nonimora and Nonimora stared back with her eyes opened wide.

"Amazing! That's the empress for you! She's naked!"

—Why is she focusing on that?

Akuto almost fell to the ground.

But Nonimora paid him no heed and continued speaking excitedly.

"The empress is going around naked to tell the people to return to nature, isn't she!? That's amazing!"

—At least it looks like we can talk peacefully about this.

Akuto was still shocked, but he breathed a sigh of relief.

But as a smile covered Nonimora's face, she ran straight toward Keena.

"Then let's continue totechite-totechite! This time the empress is my opponent!"

She had said the first to touch the other with both hands won and magic was permissible. In a space with nowhere to hide, those rules essentially meant magical combat. And as Akuto expected, Nonimora instantly fired mana spheres at Keena from four different directions while running forward. She likely planned to grab Keena while she dealt with those attacks.

"Kyah!" screamed Keena.

Akuto immediately circled in front of her and destroyed all the mana spheres with a single motion. He also blocked Nonimora herself with a mana shield.

"Ohhh?"

She tried to oppose his shield and advance, but she could not manage it. She quickly spun around, jumped, and fixed her stance.

—I couldn't hold back because I acted on reflex. I may have overdone it.

But Nonimora was laughing loudly.

"Ohohhh! Nice! Amazing! You're even stronger than before!"

"I'm glad. Now please listen. The empress is not suited for this kind of competition. I may be, but there is no reason to continue."

Nonimora looked disappointed, but she obediently relaxed her battle pose.

"Oh, that's no fun. I like to move around a lot."

"At any rate, the empress doesn't understand the situation, so could you explain it? I also have some questions."

Akuto went on to tell Keena what he had been told. Nonimora chimed in a few times to add some information, but she provided nothing new about choosing a new emperor.

"In other words, one of the people the Jewel Branch of Hourai reacted to has to become emperor?" asked Keena.

"Yes. They say the Jewel Branch of Hourai will decide who, but it's just a tool. I assume whoever uses it will become emperor. That means the emperor has to be chosen before that," agreed Nonimora

"In that case, I don't have to be empress," said Keena as if it were nothing.

"Eh?"

Nonimora stared at her in surprise.

"Like I said, I don't have to be empress."

"Wait a second. You can't set aside being empress like that. Of course, if you insist on doing so, I'll take the title from you, but..."

She was clearly confused, but she folded her arms while looking oddly nervous.

"Didn't you come here to get the imperial throne?" asked Akuto curiously.

Based on the situation, he had assumed Nonimora would act like an invader.

"The Merlai don't desire things in that way. The issue is what the emperor or empress does with that position. And I have...no, the Merlai have a duty they must fulfill," she said.

"A duty?" asked Akuto.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but she finally nodded and spoke.

"That's right. The Merlai protect the Formless Power."

"Oh, that old knight mentioned that. I didn't really understand, but he said it's really strong."

Nonimora shook her head.

“That’s not what I was told. The people can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai to plunge into the Formless Power using the ship that travels to the star which has been set in motion. The Formless Power grants good power only to those with a good heart. Otherwise, the Formless Power will eventually destroy their entire species.”

“Is that...a legend?”

Nonimora shook her head again.

“Those are the words of the first tribe leader, so it isn’t a legend. We also have the ship that goes to the star.”

“But...going to a star?”

“Yes. Research into travelling beyond the moon...no, research into travelling beyond the planets circling the sun was stopped. No one thinks about going into space anymore. There is probably some kind of wall if you travel through space far enough. And if you go that far, you can touch it. That is how we view it.”

Nonimora’s explanation matched with Akuto’s worldview. And Yamato Bouichirou had mentioned an invasion from outside the universe, so it was possible there was something beyond that wall.

"I don't know what you mean by a good heart, but we might be able to help you with that."

Akuto turned toward Keena, but she held a finger to her cheek with a blank look on her face.

"But if that's the case, why don't I just give up my position as empress?"

"I hate people who don't live up to their great duty," said Nonimora. "You have the Imperial Regalia, so you are the empress."

"Yes, but I didn't want to become empress."

"Is that so?" Nonimora stood before Keena and put her hands on her hips. "Then I can take the position from you and I'll take a nice bonus along with it."

"A nice bonus?"

Keena tilted her head.

"Him." Nonimora pointed at Akuto. "When he protected you just now, I could tell you're suppressing his power with the Imperial Regalia."

"Ah!" cried Keena upon realizing what Nonimora meant.

If she gave up the Imperial Regalia, she was giving up her relationship

with Akuto as the demon king.

"I can't let that happen. You can't have my position!"

She shook her head and Nonimora looked disappointed.

"Oh, I see. And after I'd taken a liking to him. I wanted to have him by my side. But the Merlai know humans aren't possessions, so how about this? I don't need the imperial throne, but I'll have him help me protect the Formless Power. And he has free will, so you and I can have a hem-hem competition and let him decide the winner."

She clapped her hands together as if to declare it was a good idea.

"Hem-hem?"

Both Keena and Akuto looked puzzled.

Nonimora's mouth opened in surprise.

"You don't know about hem-hem? But it's instinctual for humans. You're naked, so I assumed you'd know."

"Eh? But I don't," said Keena. "You use weird words, Nonimora-chan."

"Fine then." Nonimora raised a finger. "Hem-hem is when a guy puts his ryun-ryun in a girl's pakk-pakk to make a child."

"Bh!"

"Eh?"

Akuto spat out the saliva in his mouth and Keena fell silent and grew bright red.

Nonimora looked back and forth between them with a puzzled look.

"Why are you reacting like that? It's a natural thing. It's the best way for two girls to compete for a guy they like. And if you like both of us, the three of us can do it together."

Akuto understood that was how it worked from a purely natural perspective, but...

"Wait a second. Nonimora, are you a girl?"

"Yes. How rude. Now, time for hem-hem. I'll do my best!"

Nonimora swung her arms around to pump herself up.

"No, wait a minute!"

Akuto frantically waved his hands back and forth.

“What is your problem? There’s nothing wrong with trying it out,” said Nonimora as if it were not a big deal. “Unlike in ancient times, you can’t get any diseases and there’s magic to make sure you don’t have a child.”

“Th-that isn’t the issue.”

Akuto shook his head while Keena clung to his arm and looked at Nonimora with hostility in her eyes.

“A-chan doesn’t do that kind of thing!”

But that hostile glare did not faze her.

“It isn’t right to keep a guy to yourself! You can be his favorite, but you should lend him out at least once a week!”

—Her sense of values is just too different.

Just as Akuto tried to figure out what to say, help arrived.

“Stop right there, you filthy-mouthed child! Akuto-sama is mine!”

Fujiko’s comments were usually a bother, but they were welcome here.

They must have been monitoring the situation because Yoshie and the others entered behind Fujiko.

"That's a lot of girls! So your name is Akuto, is it? You sure are popular. If you have hem-hem with me once...no, twice a month, I think you'll really start to like me."

Akuto assumed Fujiko would grow hostile, but after a bit of thought, she nodded as if to say it was not a bad idea.

"Yes... That's an excellent idea! Akuto-sama is a kind person, so he would want to make love to his women in a rotation at first. But he would begin visiting a certain one more and more frequently! That's perfect. Eventually, I would take four...no, five days a week. One day could be left to some worthless girl out of pity or obligation and the last day would be for him to rest."

"That won't happen as long as I'm around!" declared Nonimora. "I'm way better at hem-hem!"

"Your puny body can't use any kind of techniques! But my abundant body can do all sorts of things!"

Fujiko began touching her body to show it off, but Nonimora refused to lose.

"I'm really good at suppo-suppo! I can send even a demonic beast to heaven!"

"Please, enough of this..."

Akuto tried to stop them, but someone else's comment topped the

others.

"I am willing to let him ravish me in ways simply impossible for a human."

That ridiculous statement of course came from Korone.

"Could you not make the situation even more complicated?"

As Akuto turned toward her, she continued to speak with a serious expression.

"It is worth thinking about what Nonimora-san said. I am sure they will respect your will, but the government has decided to take action."

"As long as this doesn't get dangerous, I can only go along with their decision."

Despite what he said, Akuto could not deny that he had a bad feeling about what was to come.

A few days after Nonimora's arrival, the government announced they were putting together an expedition containing the empress, Akuto, and the Imperial Knights. While Akuto and the others were overwhelmed with preparations, it did not seem the academy students had much to do. But then Student Council President Lily Shiraishi ordered some of them to take part in a certain task.

"A large amount of secret funds are being used, so some large-scale magical operation must be underway somewhere. Why can't you understand something so simple?"

Lily had gathered Fujiko, Yoshie, Junko, and Hiroshi in the student council room and she was lecturing Hiroshi as he stood in front of her desk.

He looked apologetic, but he still pouted his lips a bit and argued his case.

"I'm the only one here who was raised in a normal household."

He was the son of the family which had for some reason been given the Brave suit, but he had not been born to a high-level priest's family like the others gathered there. He had been told to investigate CIMO 8's activities and they did not know what went on inside all of the religions.

"But you are the only one who can boldly take illegal actions. And we can't contact you telepathically while you do so, so you have to act on your own judgment."

Lily acted like a teacher and Hiroshi felt like he was being unreasonably bullied.

"But just because the secretariat's secret funds are being used doesn't tell us where they're being used. We may know that CIMO 8 has been very busy and that the guy named USD is plotting something, but where

am I supposed to investigate?"

"I just explained that. The Diet members with ties to the religions are meeting in secret with corrupt priests, so sneak into one of those meetings and gather some information."

"But I don't know who those corrupt priests or dangerous Diet members are."

"I gave you a list."

"There are too many!"

"It's up to you to figure out who is likely to act when. And the timing will change what information you find."

"And I'm saying I don't know how to do that!"

"Oh... Well, I see."

Lily folded her arms.

"But..." Yoshie spoke up to help. "It would be impossible for Miwa-kun to investigate too deeply. After all, it seems that USD guy acquired some of the Brave suit's secrets from Yamato Bouichirou."

"But he hasn't done anything about him. If all goes well, he might even

be able to meet with this USD. Then he can directly ask him what he's doing."

Lily smiled thinly as she spoke.

Hiroshi mentally paled as he realized how dangerous a situation he was being forced into.

"But USD isn't showing up. For one thing, USD is extremely rich. Would he really so blatantly use public money if he wants to keep this a secret?"

"I understand your point, but this began once that small Merlai girl arrived and it is not unnatural for him to use public money for his work," said Fujiko.

"Yes, but it's a lot of money just to investigate the Merlai. Also, we know they aren't actually investigating it. We have all of the Imperial Knights' information thanks to Keena."

Fujiko was forced to agree with Yoshie's explanation.

"You're right. But if it is really that great a sum being spent, it may be difficult to think of it simply as USD's conspiracy."

"These days, money is only needed for transfers that use energy on a large scale and magical experiments that make use of those transfers. There are of course exceptions like Sai Akuto that ignore that and waste a lot of energy. At any rate, what could they be doing?"

Lily brought her hands together on the desk.

“What if CIMO 8 is breaking apart?” suggested Junko.

Everyone turned toward her.

She waved her hands embarrassedly at the unexpected attention.

“Um, the Suhara followers were not all united, so I thought maybe the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office does not get along either. Especially since they lost Yamato Bouichirou.”

“It’s possible. In that case, we were thinking about this all wrong. We could try tracking down a member other than USD.”

Lily turned toward Hiroshi.

He jumped like a napping student who was suddenly asked for an answer.

“I had a feeling it would come to this...”

“Don’t say that. I’ll give you a starting point. Here’s a list of the important people.”

Lily displayed a list of names on a mana screen and slid it toward him.

Once he took it, his eyebrows twitched.

The list was quite large.

"Wait a minute..."

"It has to be a large list. These are the people seen entering or leaving the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office but aren't staff members. There are some contractors who go in and out, which is perfect for camouflage."

"Now I won't have time to go on dates..."

"Sounds like you've been enjoying yourself. But you shouldn't say that kind of thing when her sister's sitting right behind you."

Lily used her chin to indicate behind him.

It had completely slipped his mind. He was currently dating the idol named Hoshino Yuri, but her real name was Hattori Yuuko and she was Hattori Junko's younger sister.

"If you cause any problems for Yuuko's job, I will personally hunt you down."

Hiroshi heard a sword lift partly from its scabbard. Without turning around, he stiffly began walking.

"I-I will start that investigation."

"Thanks for your cooperation."

Lily waved a hand to see him off.

It was not that Hiroshi had been slow to act. The situation had simply proceeded more quickly than expected.

A dog and a bewitchingly beautiful boy were looking at a ship from a distance. It was a large ship that flew through the sky and it was custom made to be especially luxurious.

"The empress's private ship. I wish I could ride on it," said the bewitchingly beautiful boy whose CIMO 8 codename was Esper and whose name was Kei.

"The standards of comfort are different for a dog, so I have little interest in it," said the hairy dog whose codename was The One.

The empress's private ship was located in the palace's yard and the two of them were viewing it from a building in the center of the imperial capital. Parts of the yard were hidden by trees, but the ship was large enough to be seen. The white ship had a simple streamlined design and its surface glittered as it reflected the sun, but detailed patterns were carved deep in the smooth reflective surface. The color and shape of those patterns seemed to change depending on the angle they were

viewed from, so the ship had a fantastical beauty to it.

"That and two Imperial Knight guard ships will be travelling to the Merlai village, right?"

"Yes. And Morlock is already inside."

The horizontal opening of The One's dog mouth opened and closed as he spoke.

"I'm so jealous. It must be wonderful on there."

Kei clasped his hands behind his head, but his words contained no emotion.

"He does not have a normal human body either, so his standards of comfort must be different as well."

The One looked up at Kei, but no one could tell what expression his dog face contained. But when he spoke to Kei, he kept his voice low as if speaking a secret.

"By the way, you really scared me back there. I didn't expect you to announce our betrayal, even if it was jokingly. Surely you aren't going to say you won't betray USD."

"That was just a tasteful joke. And USD's already discovered your betrayal, so it doesn't matter."

Kei also kept his voice low as he responded, but it was only his tone of voice he kept subdued. He had a bewitching smile on his lips that did not look like it belonged on a boy's face

"But even if he's caught on to your betrayal, he'd never think I would betray him. Then again, you could call betrayal another form of love. Just kidding."

Kei grinned and The One trembled.

"As an alien, I have grown quite skilled at reading a human's thoughts from their behavior, but I can never tell what you're thinking. I thought you had agreed to modify your body for USD's sake. After all, the project to strengthen you was his idea."

"Hey, do you think Kento loves me?"

Kei's tone suddenly grew serious and The One nodded.

"It seems so. And it would be a problem if he doesn't. He needs to believe that you haven't betrayed him."

"Heh heh... I see. That's a relief."

Kei stretched and gave a smile of pure enjoyment.

"Then I'll go meet with Kento. He wants to discuss some stuff with me."

He thinks another imperial candidate is going to arrive in addition to the Merlai."

"A private meeting between two males?"

"Even aliens are prejudiced about that? Well, whatever. There's something I want to do, so I'm doing it."

Kei waved and parted with The One.

Once Kei disappeared from view, The One gave a cruel expression that was recognizable even on a dog face.

"A human mind I cannot understand, hm? But there is nothing more logically constructed than a mind. They obey their desires and give in to threats."

No human was there to see the look on The One's face.

"A-chan, this is amazing! This is what you call an all-expenses paid vacation!"

"This isn't a vacation."

Keena and Akuto boarded her personal ship. She simply rejoiced, but he was checking for any oddities or people hiding on the ship. She had released a certain percentage of his power, so he would not overlook

even the slightest mana abnormality. In addition, he could read the life logs of the Imperial Knights via the gods. He could see their career histories and even their personal secrets.

—There's no sign of anyone disguising themselves and coming aboard. I feel bad about doing this to the knights, though.

He silently apologized. He knew this was necessary, but it still made him feel guilty.

"Nothing is out of the ordinary," added Korone as she walked up behind him.

"Then it's time to have fun!"

Keena hung from Akuto's arm with a smile covering her face and Nonimora hung from the opposite arm.

"Don't forget me. This trip would be meaningless without me!"

They were all quite noisy, but those four were the group taking the ship to the Merlai village. The Imperial Knights would ride the other two ships. Keena had selfishly requested that not even a few of the knights stayed on her ship. Then again, the lack of any knights made it easier for Akuto to act if something did happen, so he had no reason to object.

"Allow me to explain our flight plan. We will travel south from the capital. Our destination is located here on the map."

Korone displayed a map on a mana screen.

"The Merlai village is located in the center of this island. It is quite large for a village and it contains as much land as the area within the capital's belt line."

"It must have been a large theme park," said Akuto.

The inside of the ship was quite comfortable and the carpeted cabins were just as large and nicely furnished as a top-class apartment. Akuto sat on the circular sofa in the center of the cabin while he listened to Korone's explanation. Nonimora and Keena were leaning against him, but he was holding them off as if playing with a dog.

"It was. However, the island is also quite large and most of it is covered in jungle. It is made from trees that absorb mana, so the village was difficult to detect from the imperial mainland. And they were of course intentionally planted for that reason," explained Korone.

"But Nonimora says people from her village have visited the imperial mainland and they have a magical culture, so they must be under the empire's influence," said Akuto.

It was Nonimora who answered.

"That's right. The Merlai follow the god Aff, but we can restrict what information we give by receiving the benefits of following a god but not returning a log. And that's because we can use a portion of the Formless

Power.”

Nonimora spoke casually, but this was another shocking statement for Akuto.

“So all this time there have been people personifying the ideals of the black magicians on a small scale?”

“It seems so, but only because of this Formless Power.” Korone had heard this explanation before, so she explained the situation to him. “But it is not known to what the term ‘Formless Power’ refers or what its effects are. However, we have seen a similar power.”

Korone glanced over at Keena.

She was hesitant to directly state in in front of Nonimora, but Akuto understood what she meant. He recalled the moment when Keena had altered everyone’s memories.

“I feel like everything is connected.”

He looked at Keena as well. She had been toying with his arm, but now she looked up in surprise and averted her gaze.

“Anyway, we will maintain a decent altitude over the jungle and descend into the village. The empress is making this journey on the invitation of her apparent relative, Nonimora Kananoni-sama. And as Nonimora-sama has suggested, we will be investigating the power of the Jewel Branch of Hourai. The Imperial Knights will be sending an

investigation team along with us, so please keep that in mind."

Korone finished her explanation. Akuto had already heard all this countless times from the old knight named Yuuki Jouji.

"Understood," he said. "Let's do our part in this."

Korone headed toward the cockpit because she would be piloting it on her own.

After she left, Nonimora grew a bit livelier.

"Okay, let's get down to the hem-hem."

"No, you promised not to do it on the ship. ...Not that we'll be doing it elsewhere either."

Akuto peeled the girl off of him. She looked displeased, so he decided to make her a drink.

"Look, there's a bar over there, so I can get you a drink. Is there anything you'd like? Nothing alcoholic."

But as he stood up, someone tugged on his arm. It was Keena.

"What is it?" he asked.



She fidgeted as if she wanted to say something and she repeatedly tugged on his sleeve.

"Again: what is it?"

Only after he asked a second time did she speak very quietly.

"Hey... Would you like it if I did it too?"

"Eh?"

He was not sure what she meant, so he moved his face in closer and asked her again.

She blushed and spoke again.

"If you want, we could do it..."

"Do what?"

"Hem-hem..."

She was looking him directly in the eye, so she did not appear to be joking.

"Um... Well... Are you sure you know what that means?" he asked seriously while moving away from her.

"A-chaaan!"

She grabbed onto his sleeve, but he rather forcibly pulled his arm away and headed for the bar.

"Ha ha... Okay, what would you like, Keena?"

Nonimora rejoiced when she saw how he was acting and she threw her small self onto the sofa.

"Oh? Oh? Oh? Has my charm won you over? Is that it?"

"No, it isn't."

He was not sure what to say, so he made three random drinks and changed to subject in an attempt to get some serious information out of Nonimora.

"More importantly, does the Jewel Branch of Hourai itself have any power?"

The wooden box containing the Jewel Branch of Hourai was placed on the table. Sasahara Nozomi's family had been protecting it for generations.

That question put a serious expression on Nonimora's face.

"It is said that the first test subject for the mana culture was the emperor and that emperor was my ancestor. The Jewel Branch of Hourai informs those with strong imperial blood that the imperial selection has begun. It was probably made for that purpose."

"Then why was it passed down by the Sasahara family?"

"That was a cowardly act. Those in the imperial capital were ensuring that the imperial throne would remain in their own line."

"I see. So that's it. It was a complication of history."

Akuto returned to the sofa and lined the drinks up on the table. He then felt a soft sensation wrap around his left arm.

Keena was clinging to his arm once more.

"What is it?" he asked.

She did not answer and started rubbing against his arm.

"Rub rub..."

She rubbed her cheek against his upper arm, pressed her chest against his forearm, and began swaying her entire body back and forth like a cat.

"C'mon, stop that."

He tore her off of his arm.

She gave a groan that seemed half displeasure and half confusion.

"You're acting a little weird today," he said.

She did not reply and simply looked irritated.

"Ohhh! That looks like fun! I think I'll rub against you too while

continuing this serious discussion!”

Nonimora grabbed onto his right arm and started doing what Keena had done, but when she spoke, it was the same serious topic as before. It was weird.

“It’s said a few imperial candidates – that is, the original emperor’s descendants – scattered around the world, but the descendants of the primary successor at the time continually betrayed the other candidates after becoming emperor.”

As Nonimora spoke, Keena started rubbing against Akuto’s arm again. He could no longer shake them off.

“And you said the Jewel Branch of Hourai is also the key to activating a ship to a star,” added Akuto.

“That’s right.” Nonimora nodded. “The ship to the star flew into space once before and it brought back a portion of the Formless Power. That is why I can use a portion of it. That is what that L’Isle-Adam was saying.”

“Then what is that power?”

At that point, Korone returned to the cabin. A fair bit of time had passed since they had left. Akuto thought they might have already arrived, but it turned out he was wrong.

“I apologize for interrupting, but I have a report.”

"What is it?"

"The ship is crashing."

"What?"

"It is crashing. I have lost control."

She gave the report so calmly that it sounded unimportant, but it was clearly an emergency.

"W-wait. How did this happen? Were we attacked?"

"No. If anything, we were the ones to attack. I do not know why, but the ship's control system has been taken over from the inside. Its self-defense weapons shot down the two Imperial Knight ships."

"It was taken over from the inside? Impossible. There's no one onboard but us."

"That is the mystery. However, we must accept reality and act accordingly. As such, we must prepare to evacuate. This may be a wonderfully comfortable ship, but it is crashing as we speak."

"...U-understood."

Akuto stood up and ran to retrieve his school bag. Fortunately, Akuto and Keena's luggage was gathered in a large bag and they had not opened it yet.

"Eh? It's crashing? Really? But it's been so quiet," said Keena.

Korone nodded.

"Unfortunately, it is true. In the name of comfort, the ship's soundproofing and attitude control are perfect."

Korone forced open the cabin door and wind rushed in. Akuto walked over to the door and saw a green carpet of jungle below. It was oddly close by and he could tell they were gradually lowering while the ship remained perfectly horizontal.

"We have already arrived at the island," explained Korone. "We will merely crash in the jungle surrounding the village."

Akuto looked back toward Keena and Nonimora. Neither of them looked particularly worried. Nonimora even appeared to be thoroughly enjoying the situation. Then again, Keena could fly and Nonimora probably had no worries about this kind of thing.

"But please be careful. The jungle is filled with plants that absorb mana. Mana will not be stable except at high altitudes."

By the time Korone said that, they had already jumped out of the ship.

"Oh, that's right..."

"Eh? Then I can't fly? ...I really can't! Kyaaaah!"

"Ah ha ha. Don't be so scared! If you find a tall tree and fall while jumping from leaf to leaf, you'll be just fine!"

Nonimora laughed.

—That's asking a bit much, but I guess we have no other choice.

As he fell, Akuto held Keena close.

He looked up and saw Korone jump out with a parachute on her back.

Chapter 2: A True Hero

"We've lost track of the empress's ship?" repeated Lily.

That classified information had been brought to her by Junko.

The two of them were facing each other on either side of the student council room's desk.

"It only just happened," whispered Junko. "This is naturally top secret, so do not tell anyone else."

"Who did it?"

Lily's expression was halfway between confusion and rage. She seemed to have some definite suspicions, but Junko could not answer.

"We have no information on that yet, but he is with them, so they should be fine no matter what happens."

Lily tapped her desk in irritation.

"You mean Sai Akuto? I agree it's silly to worry about the empress's safety. I'm asking whether this was CIMO 8's doing or not."

Junko had her doubts about Lily's attitude.

"President, what do you want to do about this?"

Lily's mouth twisted into a grin.

"If you don't know that, you haven't been paying attention. I don't like CIMO 8 and I want to crush them," she stated clearly. "Ever since that Nonimora girl showed up, everyone's been interested in the future of the empire, but I only care about crushing that group."

"But that is nothing more than a personal grudge. I only agreed to your summons because I wanted to protect Keena and the others from this conspiracy."

Junko leaned forward angrily, but Lily calmly reached out and flicked the girl's forehead.

"Don't be stupid. Just be honest and say you're doing it for Sai Akuto. And let me tell you one thing: whether you're talking about politics or whatever else, most of the world runs on personal grudges. After all, the human race has managed to use the power of grudges to evolve. Remember that. We will be priests one day and by then it's too late to be surprised."

"Now you are just being crazy," complained Junko while holding her forehead.

"Whether you believe it or not, you'll see it firsthand before long. You'll see what kind of work goes into protecting this empire. Your Hattori

family might even receive orders directly from CIMO 8. But I think I know how you'd handle that given how you disobeyed orders in the past."

"That was..."

"You don't have to defend yourself. If you understand the theory behind this, then go convince your father."

"Eh?"

Lily's sudden topic change confused Junko.

"The Imperial Knights were shot down, so the rest of the knights aren't going to stay quiet. But CIMO 8 will have made preparations to avoid that. My guess is they'll blame it on the Merlai."

"Oh... I get it."

"And if it comes to war, the Hattori family will act as commander. But we also need to make sure it doesn't come to war. If a nation's ruler does a good job of reading the general atmosphere of the people, a war isn't hard to start."

Lily was suitably convincing and Junko pulled away from the desk while feeling embarrassed her own thoughts had not made it that far.

"Understood."

"Civilian control is meaningless. Propaganda and conspiracies are the way to win," said Lily with a smile. "That's what makes this so dangerous."

At that point, a telepathic call arrived from Hiroshi.

"Oh, excuse me. ...What is it?"

Hiroshi's frantic voice reached her mind.

<I'm about to begin pursuit. I've detected one of them.>

"Understood. Please provide periodic reports on their location."

Lily closed the connection and grinned.

"Good. They've started moving."

"Hiroshi is pursuing them, right? Should I go too?" asked Junko.

"No." Lily shook her head. "Deal with your father first. And if Hiroshi's found someone, it means they're a decoy. They'd never miss his shoddy attempt at tailing them. However, this definitely means they've started moving, so we just have to check in the opposite direction from Hiroshi." She spoke calmly. "I need to make sure the three officers are ready to move when his next report comes in."

"I see..."

Junko realized she was no match for this student council president.

Lily's conjecture turned out to be dead on.

Kei and The One watched as Rubbers and Hiroshi moved away between the buildings of the capital's city center.

<Now then. The foolish pursuer has latched onto the rubber man.>

They were still in public, so The One communicated telepathically.

It was early afternoon and the two of them were in the government district. They looked like a wealthy and beautiful boy walking a large dog.

"Well, when he turns off the rubber form, he's just a large bald man."

Kei spoke aloud and laughed.

<It seems Rubbers and that boy have met before.>

"It must have been during the war at the school. I don't know the details, but I don't like that boy who owns the Brave suit. After all, he must be an acquaintance of Kento's."

Kei's smile vanished in an instant and he sent a cold glare toward

Hiroshi's receding back.

<Did USD say anything?> asked The One as if the mention of Kento had reminded him.

"We met the day before, so we talked about a lot, but nothing was all that different. He didn't suspect me at all."

<Did he say anything concerning the Formless Power?>

"He didn't say anything more than you have. He did say we have to acquire it all costs, though."

<Is that so? Now, are you ready?> asked The One suddenly.

"You sure are insistent." Kei laughed. "And yes, there are no problems."

The boy and dog entered a nearby building.

"You thought you'd lost us, but we're still following you, arinsu."

Ootake Michie laughed while hiding on a nearby rooftop. She was one of the three officers of the student council and she specialized in using small mechanical life forms, so she also specialized in tracking people.



"Something bothers me about that building," said Yoshie with a tilt of the head.

It was unclear if she had been listening to Michie's bragging or not. She pushed up the goggles she used as binoculars and turned to the small L'Isle-Adam next to her.

"Keisu, do you remember anything?"

"No, nothing. But I'm well aware that I'm not very smart."

That was not modesty. Keisu was quite dumb for a L'Isle-Adam and she had a harder time thinking things through than a human. Her clothes and speech were old fashioned and she could be called the very first L'Isle-Adam.

"Oh, that's right." Yoshie turned to Michie. "Now, how should we pursue them?"

Yoshie and Keisu were working with the three officers in order to add Keisu's analysis ability and Yoshie's newly made mana canceler to Michie's tracking ability. Keisu's mana could not be detected by modern systems, so Yoshie had used that and successfully created a field around Keisu that hid people from the gods. As Hiroshi drew CIMO 8's attention, they had successfully hidden themselves.

"We can't exactly enter the building, arinsu. I'll contact Arnoul and Kanna who we had chase after them, arinsu."

Michie sent an encrypted telepathic call to Arnoul and Kamiyama Kanna, the other two student council officers.

However, she did not receive the answer she wanted.

<I can't pursue any further, gya. But I did see them get on the elevator, gya. It only goes down to the second basement, so I can watch and see how far they go down, gya.>

But then Kanna's voice grew surprised.

<The light disappeared at the second basement and it isn't coming back, gya.>

"So they're going even deeper."

That comment reminded Yoshie of something, so she brought a hand to her forehead and thought.

After a moment, she suddenly clapped her hands and immediately contacted Fujiko telepathically.

"Hey, Etou-san. Do you remember the coordinates from that incident?"

"Understood. I will discuss this with the student council president first. Do not take any hasty actions until I do."

Fujiko sounded calm enough, but she was actually seething with anger. The only reason she had not immediately taken action was due to her self-preservation instincts winning out over her anger.

She visited the student council room and suddenly spoke under the assumption that the three officers had already contacted the president.

"This would take a long time to explain."

"I heard what Kita Yoshie said secondhand, but it wasn't enough to understand it. What exactly is this about?" asked Lily. "All I know is that

there's something under that building."

Fujiko lowered her voice so no one else could hear.

"I checked the coordinates and that is the place where the demon king resurrection ceremony was held. Although only Soga Keena and I went there, so almost no one remembers it."

"Back then, huh?" Lily was left almost speechless. "I only heard about that 'resurrection', but it is true he came back from there as a true demon king."

"Yes. I placed him in the device."

Fujiko sounded somehow proud of that fact.

"But if they're going there, does it mean what I think it means?"

Lily looked concerned for once and Fujiko nodded.

"They are attempting to create a new demon king."

"But Sai Akuto was most likely born somewhere else, right? So why are they going there?"

"To be born as a demon king like Akuto-sama was, you of course must be born as a child. It is also possible only one such individual can exist at

a single time."

"Then that's all the more reason why a normal person couldn't become a demon king."

Lily almost sounded like she was trying to put herself at ease, but Fujiko shook her head.

"I do not like to show off my own failure, but remember when Akuto-sama started a war in this academy?"

"Yes? What about it?"

"To produce the mana waves needed to control the demonic beasts, I cultivated some of Akuto-sama's cells, but that rubber man stole them."

"That guy known as Rubbers? I doubt Sai Akuto would be careless enough to let someone cultivate his cells now, but there's nothing he can do if it had already happened. Anyway, are you saying it's possible to turn a normal person into a demon king by adding in those cells?" Lily stood up. "If we know the coordinates, we can transfer there. If we do so from inside the school, we can rely on the academy's resources."

"It looks like we have no other choice," said Fujiko with a shrug.

"You want me to come back? They knew I was following them from the beginning?"

Hiroshi was left dumbfounded after he was telepathically informed of the truth.

He had already spent a long time tracking the man. He had received this telepathic call just after finding it odd that his target had left the city center and entered a building that was under construction.

When he carefully observed the skinhead man once more, the man turned around. His skin grew black as it transformed into the rubber indicated by his name. He stared directly at Hiroshi as he became perfectly smooth and non-human. This was the face of Rubbers that Hiroshi had seen before.

"So I was tricked," muttered Hiroshi.

Unexpectedly, Rubbers spoke.

"That's right."

That sharp reply in a deep male voice was accompanied by his right arm quickly extending.

Hiroshi realized he could not evade, so he simply muttered the word "Brave". The transfer field created when the suit transferred in defended against the arm.

It was unclear if Rubbers could feel pain because he grinned as his arm

was harshly deflected.

"Having a guy do it feels a bit different from a girl. Having it be a girl is better of course."

Hiroshi frowned at the perverted feel of his tone.

"You say some strange things. Anyway, I don't have time to deal with you. You can play on your own."

The day's work was already complete at the construction site, so there was no one around. Hiroshi activated the suit's flight ability and began to ascend.

"Hold it! I was simply told to stall for time!"

Rubbers extended his arm again and grabbed at Hiroshi's foot.

"Kh!"

Hiroshi gave up on rising and swung the high frequency blade equipped on his right arm. This caused Rubbers to let go and return his arm to normal.

"Are you aware you can't win in a straight fight?" asked Hiroshi to provoke his opponent.

But Rubbers showed no sign of being affected by it.

"Well aware," he said mockingly. "No one would be stupid enough to face someone equipped with mana canceler."

A look of anger reached Hiroshi's face instead and he moved quickly toward Rubbers.

"That just means I have to take the fight to you!"

But Rubbers remained unfazed despite the fact that any magic user would fear having Brave rush at them.

"That doesn't matter. I just have to flee."

Rubbers slipped into the half-constructed building.

"I'm faster than you!"

Hiroshi tried to pursue further, but he stopped when he realized the man had entered a space too narrow for a normal human. He had entered the gap between ceiling and floor that would eventually hold the complex air conditioning system.

"You damn rubber man!"

Hiroshi clicked his tongue.

"I know some of that suit's shortcomings and I have analyzed your movement patterns."

Rubbers's voice echoed from the building's framework.

"So what?" replied Hiroshi. "You don't seem able to create a field to shut out the suit's energy and you don't seem able to shut down the suit's devices themselves."

During his series of battles against the late Empress Kazuko, the weaknesses of the supposedly invincible Brave suit had been made clear. If it was surrounded in a virtual alternate dimension field, its transfer of energy would be cut off. However, only a magician on Kazuko or Akuto's level could manage that.

Also, the Brave suit itself had been given to him by Yamato Bouichirou. That meant anyone who knew the code could shut it down from the outside. Currently, that code was supposedly held by USD, but USD had not shown himself here.

That left no reason why Hiroshi would lose to Rubbers.

"Like I said, my objective is to buy time. To maintain your reputation, you can't destroy this building. All I have to do is continue making small, insignificant attacks," sneered Rubbers.

"Why is USD letting me attack you when he could stop this suit?"

Sensing a contradiction, Hiroshi decided to ask.

"I never know what USD is thinking. Plus, this has nothing to do with him."

That answer confused Hiroshi.

"What?"

"As you've probably guessed, a plan is in motion. USD may have started that plan, but we've moved the timetable up without him. This has nothing to do with him."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Why the hell would I tell you!? Don't you get it? As long as you're using that suit, you're nothing more than a pawn in USD's game. He has you under his control. If I went ahead and told you everything, I'd be telling it to him!"

Rubbers's voice grew louder as he continued.

He may have been losing his cool or he may have been delighting at the mental pain he was causing. Either way, Hiroshi understood he could not have a proper conversation with the man. That said, it was clear Rubbers was telling the truth.

"You don't need to tell me because I already know."

Hiroshi tried to end the conversation there, but Rubbers was stubborn.

"Not a chance. I don't know why Yamato Bouichirou chose someone like you. In fact, I don't even know what he wanted you to do. You have no grand ambitions, you have no real philosophical views, your family is nothing, and you have no ability. Your one virtue is how readily you go along with what people tell you. In other words, it's easy for certain types of people to make use of you."

"...Shut up!"



Hiroshi swung his high frequency blade to sever Rubbers's stretched arm, but he forgot to activate the mana canceler as he did so. The blade was unable to cut through the rubber body and the arm simply bent.

"As a more experienced fighter, let me give you a piece of advice: don't try to rush things."

Rubbers mocked Hiroshi's mistake.

"Tch."

Hiroshi began searching for a way to leave this place, but an arm extended toward him when he tried to fall back.

"Dammit!"

He grew angry, but not only because he was having difficulty leaving. Rubbers's comments had been right on the mark.

"You all go help Hiroshi."

Lily telepathically gave the three officers that instruction. The three of them, Yoshie, and Keisu were surprised, but they obediently replied.

"So it will just be the two of us?" asked Fujiko.

Those two girls were in the demon king's castle below the academy. Ever since losing Peterhausen, Akuto had stayed away from that area and Fujiko's remodeling job had given it an eerie atmosphere.

"Is that a problem?"

"Of course it is. We are heading into danger and I can only assume you sent your three officers away for that very reason."

"Correct. Then again, Hiroshi does seem to be in danger, so it wasn't a bad decision for that reason either. Anyway, I'll be doing most of the work, so there's nothing to worry about. I know you're quick to flee, so you can start running if it gets dangerous. But I want you with me because you have the most data on the demon king."

"Fine. I will begin the transfer."

Fujiko stepped inside the transfer circle, waited for Lily to follow, and entered the coordinates.

The circle glowed and their surroundings completely changed.

Fujiko had seen the new scenery before, but Lily spoke in surprise as she had not.

"This place is huge. I'd have never guessed there was a space like this underground."

The ceiling was quite a ways up for being underground. A faint light illuminated the thick columns which were similar to those inside buildings and were placed fairly far apart.

It was unclear how far that row of columns extended, but the space was easily larger than a soccer field.

"It may be huge, but I knew the exact coordinates, so the problem lies directly before us," said Fujiko.

"Yeah. So it seems."

Lily faced directly forward where a tube extended down from above. It ended at the coffin Akuto had used before. Previously, the coffin had been all alone, but it seemed to have been modified in the short time since then. Various new devices had been attached, the most conspicuous being the aforementioned tube. It may have been an extension to an elevator.

A long-haired dog sat in front of the coffin protecting the person inside.

"A dog?" asked Fujiko doubtfully.

The three officers had indeed reported the target walking with a dog, but it was strange to find just a dog and a person in the coffin.

"We should stay on our guard," said Lily with a hint of amusement. "There's a strange look in its eyes."

"Its eyes? I can't see them through all the fur."

Lily bared her teeth in a smile.

"That's not what I meant. If you change your viewpoint a bit, you'd be able to tell."

Lily immediately extended a fist to punch the dog, but the only one surprised by the action was Fujiko.

"What are you doing!?"

"Hah. That's no ordinary dog."

Lily's fist stopped right in front of the dog because a mana shield had opened in front of it.

"I see." Fujiko backed away. "This really isn't an ordinary dog."

"Heh. It's always a surprise every time I meet a new person from CIMO 8. In this case, it isn't even a 'person'."

Lily's sharp tongue received a response.

"What a rude little girl," said the dog. "I can tell you did not have a proper upbringing."

Fujiko was dumbfounded, but Lily seemed to have predicted the dog would speak. Either that or her anger over being called a "little girl" drowned out her surprise.

"Like a dog would have any kind of upbringing whatsoever! I'll make a nice dog-meat hotpot out of you and then throw it out uneaten, so prepare yourself!"

Lily advanced toward the dog.

"It would take a while to explain my upbringing, but I will tell you my codename is The One. I think it is about time you learned the humiliation of being killed by a dog!"

The One intercepted Lily's advance head on. She specialized in physical combat and he challenged her with his canine body rather than with magic.

"Oryaaaah!" roared Lily.

The dog howled in response.

An instant later, Lily cried out in surprise. She had sent out countless punches with both hands, but The One had blocked them all with just his front paws.

"What!?"

The way he stood on his hind legs and quickly moved his short front legs looked like a dog playing with his master. However, Lily was the one being played with here.

"Damn you."

She stopped throwing punches and took a step back.

The One took a breath and exposed his canine teeth in a smile.

"I was not trying to mock me. It just so happens to look facetious when I do it with this body."

"Thanks for your consideration," said Lily with a glance to Fujiko.

Fujiko understood what she meant: they had not come here to fight a dog.

"Then let's keep at it."

Lily charged forward once more and The One intercepted her again. Their fists and paws clashed once more, but Fujiko took action this time.

However, she did not join in the bizarre battle against a dog. She began running in a wide arc to circle behind The One.

"This was our original goal, so I will stop the demon king creation process!"

"I knew you would try that. And even if we were doing this covertly, you should have given some thought to the fact that no one but me was here for protection."

Without any real concentration, The One created a mana barrier covering the coffin in front of Fujiko.

"And I expected this much! I can break through a barrier like this!"

She reached out and expanded some mana. Normally, mana grew weaker the farther it was from the magic user's body. The One may have been able to create a barrier of solidified mana without much concentration, but it would not be difficult to break through if she touched it directly.

But Fujiko's hand failed to take it apart.

"Impossible!"

At only a few steps away from the coffin, she was blocked by a translucent wall of blue light.

"Why can't you break through a simple barrier!?" shouted Lily.

However, Fujiko seemed just as confused.

"I don't know! I can only imagine its composition is different! I can't break it apart in the slightest!"

"I intertwined the mana in a way that is difficult for humans to imagine," said The One. "You will never untangle it as long as you think about this normally."

"Are you really a dog!?"

Lily raised her voice and ran forward to slip past The One, but he circled in front of her with the swiftness of a dog and she was forced to continue the fistfight.

"It does not matter to you who I am. Now, I believe it is about time. Assuming Sakura Kei did not die in there, that is."

Fujiko had been circling around the coffin to find a hole in the barrier, but just as The One finished speaking, she saw a scene she had seen before.

Light leaked from the coffin and steamy smoke rose from the slight gap that opened.

The only difference was the person inside.

"Ah!"

She realized it was already too late and she could only watch as this unknown person stood up before her.

The coffin fully opened and the figure inside came into view.

The action had a bewitching elegance that seemed out of place given the location.

"Eh?"

Fujiko found herself charmed and she stopped trying to break the barrier.

The figure's lowered head smoothly turned upward and their long hair spread out like a butterfly's wings. The scene resembled a butterfly leaving the chrysalis. Akuto's rebirth had been filled with a sinister strength that made it truly look like the birth of a demon king, but this looked more like the birth of a beautiful demon.

"I didn't think a human could endure it, but it looks like it worked."

A cruel smile appeared on The One's canine face.

"You don't mean..."

Lily stopped fighting, backed away, and gained a look of concern.

"You've awoken a new one?" muttered Fujiko.

As if in response, the new demon king spread his arms toward the unseen sky in ecstasy.

"This is...amazing. I can see it all. I can see everyone's records."

Kei was not wearing any clothes. Fujiko had originally thought he was a girl, but his lack of clothes told her otherwise. However, she could not look away. His actions were truly beautiful.

"So this is the power of a demon king. Every resource is at my fingertips. I can use everything in the world."

He raised his hands and clothes flew down to wrap around his body.

"Not even I'm sure if I transferred these here or created them."

He then turned toward Fujiko.

She jumped in fright, but could not move even a step.

He smiled.

"You're the one that prepared the demon king's cells, aren't you?"

There was nothing she could say to that.

"S-so what...if I am?"

"I have a part of the one you love inside me, so I wanted to ask if you love me."

She was taken aback by his innocent question.

"I-I don't know..."

"I see. Well, we did only just meet. But that's not your real answer. I can tell. You would never be able to love me. After all, you thought I was beautiful just now, didn't you? People who see me that way never seem able to understand me."

Kei looked around with oddly clear eyes while acting like Fujiko's answer did not matter in the slightest.

"I thought I might find someone like me if I could see the data on every imperial citizen. I had hoped to find someone who could understand me even a little, but this is amazing. There isn't anyone. I'm the only one like this. I feel like I'm standing all alone below a never-ending expanse of blue sky. It's refreshing but horribly worrying. So this is what it means to see everything."

He spoke those lonely words with what looked like a beautiful girl's face. It felt somehow fleeting, but he waved a hand and his expression completely changed.

A violent gust of wind blew through.

"Ee!"

"Tch!"

Fujiko and Lily tried to stand firm against the raging wind, but they were blown backwards a moment later. They were fortunate that the area was so large. That softened the blow of landing and they were able to escape almost all damage. If they had struck a wall instead, they would not have been so lucky.

"That isn't what I wanted. I was hoping for something that felt more solid."

Kei sounded disappointed and turned his gaze toward the two girls.

"Sorry I couldn't be more solid."

Lily stood up and took long strides toward Kei.

He tilted his head in confusion and then snapped his fingers in realization.

"No, that isn't it. I thought it would have more recoil. I thought I would feel some resistance as it blew through."

"Are you not even paying attention to us?"

Lily cursed, but she could do nothing more.

She could not even take another step.

Kei had done nothing more than turn a cold look toward her and then he started speaking to her.

"There is deep meaning behind killing someone. I understand that now that I'm a demon king. That means I only just figured it out. But going by that understanding, to kill someone is to eliminate the possibilities of everything they might have accomplished in the future."

He looked like a child excited about a newly understood concept.

"What of it? That's a really basic idea," said Lily with no understanding of what he was thinking.

"That's right." He nodded. "It is basic. But has anyone tried to turn that idea on its head? If someone is going to eliminate others' future possibilities or someone has no future possibilities whatsoever, then it's okay to kill them."

His expression was bright.

"Did you realize that after looking at everyone's logs?" asked Lily in disgust. "Do you think you're a real god or something?"

Her sardonic tone did nothing to move his heart.

"A god? Perhaps I should call myself a demon god. No, it doesn't matter. And I don't want to kill you. That has no relation to what I must do. You could say I now stand in a position to accurately judge who can and can't be killed. In that way, I'm just like a real god."

Lily listened to his refreshing tone of voice.

"What is it that you 'must do'?"

"Well... Oh, look. It's started. I need to protect this place from them."

He suddenly looked up into empty space as if he had sensed something.

"What exactly has started?" asked Lily.

"You'll know soon enough," was all Kei said.

He picked up The One, lightly kicked off the ground, and flew up into the air.

Lily and Fujiko did not know what to do, so they stood still. When they had faced Kazuko, their opponent had still been human, but that was not the case here.

"Are you just going to let her go?" whispered Fujiko.

"This is the first time I've felt like I can't even resist," whispered back Lily.

"Come to think of it, you have never seen Akuto-sama fight seriously."

"Next time I meet Sai Akuto, I might have to treat him differently. ...
Anyway, it looks like someone who can actually handle this has arrived."

Lily looked up and grinned.

As Kei and The One ascended, the ceiling above them began to crack.

"Something's coming from above?" muttered Fujiko.

"This is why I sent the three officers away. Although if I'd known we would be facing a demon king right away, I could've used him more effectively. At least he managed to arrive in time."

She grinned again and the ceiling collapsed.

Brave burst from the rubble while travelling down from aboveground.
In other words, it was Hiroshi.

"That's the one!" shouted Lily. "Knock him from the air!"

Whether he heard her or sensed the demon king with his suit, Hiroshi travelled directly toward Kei.

Kei tossed The One into the air and prepared to fight.

The One stopped in midair under his own power.

Hiroshi charged toward Kei who remained motionless, but in the instant they were about to make contact, Hiroshi's momentum suddenly vanished and he started falling.

"Eh? Hey!"

"Oh, dear..."

Lily and Fujiko panicked.

Hiroshi was no longer wearing his suit, so a boy wearing casual clothes fell upside down toward the ground.

"What are you doing?"

Lily extended an arm toward where he would land and caught him. He had to be able to use at least one type of flight magic, but he must have forgotten in shock.

But the real problem was what had caused that shock.

"Look..."

Fujiko poked at Lily and looked uneasily backwards.

A transfer circle had appeared and someone was appearing from it.

"Tch. Someone else is arriving?"

Lily's click of the tongue produced a response from Hiroshi who had finally realized what had happened.

"Is it USD!?"

Just as he guessed, it was Kento, aka USD, who appeared from the transfer circle.

"I took the liberty of removing your suit."

His voice was calm to the point of sounding disagreeable.

"So you were lying in wait this whole time?" asked Lily.

However, Kento did not immediately reply.

He looked up at Kei with a look that was half criticism and half concern.

"Why did you do this without my permission?" he asked the boy.

A unique atmosphere seemed to flow between the two of them. Despite the distance, Lily and Fujiko could sense it as well.

"Because I don't need your permission," explained Kei.

"I put off this stage because I wasn't sure your body could endure it."

"But I'm fine. It was worth trying."

"The risk was too great. If we lost you, the plan could not continue."

Kento's tone was impossibly calm given what he was saying and Kei's responses were filled with a cruel air.

"Like I said, it turned out all right. That means this is my plan now. And since you're here, it means you realized everything has already started. In that case, I'll act accordingly."

A hint of irritation could be heard in Kei's voice.

Once he was finished speaking, he turned around, grabbed The One again, and flew to the surface through the hole Hiroshi had created.

"This is a problem..."

Kento watched the boy leave, but he gave an exaggerated shrug as if it was not really that much of a problem.

"I feel like I just watched a lover's spat," complained Lily with a murderous look.

"Could you explain what exactly is happening here?"

Fujiko looked coldly at him as well.

"We had a plan to create a demon king like this ever since Rubbers stole Sai Akuto-kun's cells, but it was temporarily frozen due to insufficient research. That was my plan."

Taken aback by his odd willingness to speak, Lily asked a question.

"Then what is it that has started? And does it really require the power of a demon king?"

"A war," said Kento.



"A war?" repeated Fujiko doubtfully.

In the empire, the word "war" meant nothing more serious than what Akuto had caused before. Simply put, no other nation could oppose the empire. In a way, creating a demon king was starting a war, so doing so because of a war sounded like circular reasoning.

But Kento continued.

"A nation is going to declare war against the empire. Or rather, they will be reluctantly made to do so."

"What is going on today?" Lily shook her head. "Just how many unpredictable things am I going to be faced with?"

"I do believe that the Hattori family is prepared," said Hattori Youzou.

He was the head of the Hattori family, Junko's father, and the high priest in charge of reconstructing the god named Suhara.

He was speaking in the Hattori family's sitting room while Junko and Yuuko sat before him. They were all wearing ordinary clothes, but the strict atmosphere indicated that this was not a casual family discussion. They were speaking as the family in charge of national defense.

"I am prepared," said Junko.

"I will not sully the family name," said Yuuko.

They were faced with a coming "war" of the sort the empire had not experienced for ages. Needless to say, not even the elderly Youzou had experienced something like this. He maintained his air of dignity, but his understanding of the situation was no greater than Junko's.

The Suhara priests were being kept from the situation in ways unrelated to the loss of Suhara. The mana screen in front of the three family members displayed a news broadcast.

<An undersea kingdom that split off from the empire over a century ago is claiming a legitimate successor to the imperial throne and is planning to contact the government.>

<The cabinet is preparing for negotiations, but they will be taking a strong stance against any possible disrespect to the empress who is currently vacationing to the south.>

<The empress is still missing and we are all worried about her safety. There is still a high possibility that she has been harmed by the undersea kingdom. They insist that their king is a member of the royal family and some say they are questioning the legitimacy of the current empress.>

The screen displayed several ships that were clearly not of the imperial style. They were spindle-shaped, so they most likely had submarine abilities. This was clearly a fleet sent by the undersea kingdom.

"We have indeed received reports from the L'Isle-Adams manning the patrol boats. It is also true that the empress has gone missing," said Youzou. "However, we have been keeping that information hidden."

The Hattori family also carried out intelligence work for national defense. That made information warfare one of their specialties, but things had gone differently this time. The cabinet had released information they had been told not to.

"Father, with this made public, it will develop into war, won't it?" asked Yuuko.

With her idol work, she had good instincts for this kind of thing.

Youzou agreed.

“Even if this is part of the cabinet’s information manipulation, we must work toward what the people want.”

“That’s the same as an idol,” said Yuuko with a laugh.

Youzou rebuked her attitude, but then he smiled because she seemed to understand the truth.

However, Junko did not seem to agree.

“I am prepared, but I think it is also our duty to correct the people if they are wrong.”

“Junko.” Youzou’s tone was fairly harsh. “It is not our job to judge what is right or wrong. If we think about whether it is right or not, we cannot protect anyone. That is how it works.”

“But...”

“We fight for those who cannot and we kill for the sake of others, so we must not choose who it is we should kill.”

“I understand the theory, but someone is manipulating the information

and we more or less know who.”

Junko’s tone grew stronger, but Youzou still shook his head.

“We can only trust that the people will make the right decision. Even if we have been betrayed in the past, that is all we can do. The people will be able to see through to what is right.”

“If only Keena and Akuto were here,” muttered Junko.

“Trusting them is fine, but you should become the kind of person they can trust. That is how you should live your life,” instructed Youzou.

That was when a member of the Hattori ninja forces appeared on the other side of the room’s sliding door. Youzou sensed his presence and asked what the ninja needed.

“We have a report from the naval patrol. Someone has ignored the warnings and attempted to approach the target.”

“What do you mean by ‘someone’?”

Youzou asked for a clearer explanation and he received a nervous response.

“It is an individual.”

"What?"

"A single individual has appeared on the ocean and is approaching the target."

"Is that even possible?"

"I know it is hard to believe, but it is the truth. According to the reports, it is a demon king."

"A demon king?"

Junko and Yuuko both turned toward the paper door.

"Yes. To be clear, it is not Sai Akuto, but their presence and amount of mana put them on the same level as him."

The ninja's words brought a confused look to Junko's face.

—What is going on?

"An undersea kingdom?"

Lily sounded doubtful, but she nodded in understanding once she saw the news broadcast on Fujiko's mana screen.

She, Fujiko, Hiroshi were still underground because Kento was keeping them there.

"They refer to themselves as a republic, but they're actually an aristocracy with a king," explained Kento. "That makes them rather unique."

"So their system is similar to the empire's?" asked Lily.

Kento nodded.

"But they have a different set of values from us. They do have a magical society like we do, but they have a single god and no magical restrictions."

That surprised Fujiko.

"That sounds a lot like the ideals of black magicians."

"That's right. But that isn't the problem. Well, the difference in values may lead to problems, but their king is currently on a ship leading here. How he views us will have a large effect on what happens next."

Kento's explanation seemed indirect, but Lily understood what he was getting at.

"I see. So their king is responding to the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

"That's right. That's the only explanation for their king coming to the surface. And he might want something."

"He might want the Jewel Branch of Hourai or even the empire itself," said Lily as she thought.

"He almost certainly wants the Formless Power that lies beyond the Jewel Branch of Hourai. If not, he has no reason to approach this far. However, we of CIMO 8 could receive no information beyond that when we made preliminary contact."

"So you did contact them ahead of time."

Lily glared at Kento with a displeased look, but he ignored it.

"Of course. The reason we do not know what he is after is because they were still friendly when we contacted them. Their king wanted to participate in a fair emperor selection."

"What is wrong with that?" asked Fujiko. "It seems fine to me."

Kento shrugged.

"Sadly, people cannot trust that kind of attitude. The priests of Mufa are in charge of overseas negotiations, but they remain highly cautious."

"It looks like things only change if they can make it inside the empire like Nonimora did."

Kento looked doubtful.

"That may have been part of it, but it had more to do with the secret she had that linked the Jewel Branch of Hourai with the Formless Power. In other words, the empire is hoping to take something from the Merlai."

"I understand why, but what exactly is the Formless Power?"

"We only have predictions at this stage, but it's related to what The One is plotting."

"What is that skinny guy hoping to do as the demon king? Was that The One's doing?"

"The One is deceiving him."

Kento said nothing more.

"Then why did you turn off his suit?" asked Lily with a glance back toward Hiroshi.

"Because killing him would accomplish nothing." Kento approached Hiroshi. "But I would like your help."

"My help?"

Hiroshi looked displeased, but Kento continued nonetheless.

"Yes. You are the only one who can fight a demon king, so I want you to stop The One's conspiracy."

Hiroshi did not reply, but Lily asked another question.

"But we don't understand anything here. What is this conspiracy?"

"Most likely, it will ultimately lead to the annihilation of the human race."

Despite the horrifying words, Kento spoke casually.

The others all fell into a confused silence.

When Lily finally opened her mouth, the venom had left her tone.

"Annihilation? Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

But Kento folded his arms and shook his head as if to say it was true and there was nothing he could do to change that fact.

"The One is not human. He is a survivor from another dimension. To put it more simply, you could call him an alien."

"Geh."

"Oh, my..."

Lily and Fujiko clearly did not believe him.

"I know it's hard to believe, but the Formless Power has likely come from a place we cannot detect. We planned to acquire the Jewel Branch of Hourai which acts as a key to acquiring that power and it can only be used by those with imperial blood."

"Then why didn't you act when Nonimora was...?" Lily trailed off as she realized the answer. "Oh, I get it. She's supposed to protect the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

Kento nodded.

"That is why we contacted the Republic rather than the Merlai. It all goes back to my plan."

"Your plan?"

"My plan to acquire the Formless Power. If it was all resolved peacefully, even Akuto-kun would say nothing about it. It just had to be something the people decided on. Simply put, it could have been solved through friendly talks with the Republic. At the same time, we were preparing for war just in case. After all, the Republic could easily shake our very foundation."

"I see. I assume The One was pressing for the war side of things."

"Yes. He thought the losses could be minimized by abducting their king."

"Cruel but effective," said Lily cynically while exposing her teeth.

"So now the imperial people are having their information regulated while the new demon king and the Republic's advance fleet glare at each other?" asked Fujiko in exasperation.

"That's right. So I need you to stop this new demon king. That is the most effective method of saving the empire."

Kento held a hand out toward Hiroshi.

Hiroshi looked up at him, but turned one eye aside as if pouting.

"If I know you, you have a plan for if I refuse."

Kento narrowed his eyes as if to say "so you understand".

"Of course I do. But I am hoping for you to have a conscience."

"A conscience? Don't be ridiculous. You just want to use me as you wish."

Hiroshi shook his head and turned his back on Kento.

"That is true to an extent, but you have no other choice here."

Hiroshi did not turn back around.

"I'm out too. I won't let this go according to plan for you." Lily followed after Hiroshi. "Then again, I've been working him pretty hard myself, so this is partially my fault. Still, I want nothing to do with you. Part of me wants to fight you, but your attitude has killed off even that desire."

Fujiko sighed and followed Hiroshi as well.

"What you told us has given me something else I want to do. It seems you are hiding some other plan or ulterior motive here, but it is only women who look more captivating while hiding things and lying about their feelings."

Despite all this, Kento did not look remotely shocked. With a glance back at him, Hiroshi entered the transfer circle. Lily started to follow, but she turned around as something occurred to her.

"Oh, right. You misread one thing here."

"And what is that?" asked Kento.

Lily grinned.

"He became a true hero a while back."

Lily and Fujiko disappeared into the transfer circle, leaving Kento all alone.

—All I'm doing is pouting.

Hiroshi thought as he sat on a park bench.

He had been able to leave that place after being saved by the student council's three officers, Yoshie, and Keisu, but Rubbers's words still caught in his heart.

—I know you can never live up to an ideal, but he was still right. That's why the president has been able to use me as she wants.

"Why are you staring off into space like that?"

That sudden voice caused Hiroshi to frantically stand up.

"Wh-what is it!?"

Yuuko laughed at him.

"Ah ha ha. What are you doing? You're acting funny."

She wore a hat and glasses that changed her overall impression, so no one else in the park recognized her.

"I was just thinking," he said to dodge the question.

Yuuko grabbed his hand and began walking.

"You can do that later. Look, I made us lunch!"

They searched for an arbitrary place in the park.

The park's mana screen normally showed calming images, but today it was showing the news with text scrolling at the bottom.

The stare-off with the Republic's fleet was continuing. The news claimed conflict was unavoidable. Hiroshi and Yuuko hoped nothing would happen because they knew the truth behind it, but the general public was naturally in favor of eliminating the Republic. The optimistic idea that the Republic could easily retreat helped bring the pacifists onboard and it was expected that it would not develop past a small skirmish.

And if that happened, Yuuko would have work to do. This was likely her last day off, so she had called for Hiroshi during her free time.

"Let's eat over there."

She spread a sheet over the park's lawn.

"These rice balls have a new flavor of furikake I got from a sponsor."

"You're turning into a furikake celebrity."

They spoke and ate Yuuko's lunch, but due to the surrounding atmosphere, an odd aura would occasionally cover them as well.

"The Republic is meaningless before the legitimacy of the empire!"

A group had opened a large mana screen in the park and was broadcasting a speech. No one went out of their way to watch it and no one gathered around it, but no one complained either.

A few people walking by spoke in hushed voices as if they did not want everyone knowing what they were thinking.

"Should we go elsewhere?"

"It would be the same anywhere else."

"I don't like the feeling spreading through the city."

"You can't really blame them with what's happening."

"Honestly! You're acting weird too, Hiroshi-kun. You have Hoshino Yuri-chan with you, so be a man and put on a brave face!"

She poked at his forehead and he smiled, but it was a stiff smile.

"I'm just worried about a lot. That's all."

"Worried? It's okay. I won't be going on the front lines."

"It isn't you I'm worried about."

"Eh? Isn't that kind of cruel?"

"That isn't what I meant. Even if you are on the front lines, I'll save you, so there's nothing to worry about there."

"Oh, that's the cool boy I know."

She gave a carefree smile, but a shadow hung over Hiroshi's smile.

"So is there something else you're worried about?"

"Well...yes."

"Speak more clearly. That isn't the cool Hiroshi-kun I know."

With that comment, she playfully put her chin on his shoulder.

The unexpected proximity of her face set his heart pounding, but it turned out to be a good opportunity.

"Um...Yuuko-chan? What would you do if you were implicitly forced to do something you think you can't manage or that you don't want to do?"

The answer came sooner than he expected.

"Eh? I'd refuse."

"W-well, yes, but what if it's because you're being told to do it that makes you not want to do it? Or what if the only reason against it is personally not wanting to, but you feel a strong obligation to do so. Wouldn't you need more reason than that to not do it?"

As he spoke, he began to lose track of his own argument, but Yuuko seemed to understand because she cut in.

"Oh, so that's what you mean. In that case, it's basically the same as a job. I can tell because my job is different from a normal person's. I have to wear weird clothes and I don't always want to, but there's a ton of staff and it feels like I have to. And anyone who resists is said to be an 'artist wannabe' and ends up getting fewer jobs. Of course, if they really do want to be a true artist, they can succeed like that, but they have to have things they truly want to do and continue ahead that way."

Yuuko was talking about something wholly unrelated to Hiroshi's situation, but he found an odd understanding from parts of it.

"Yeah, that's it. I feel like I'm being forced to fight. And there are people with all sorts of different plans around me and they're all trying to use me."

"In my experience..."

Yuuko raised her index finger with an air of importance.

"Yes?"

Hiroshi leaned forward, waiting for her answer.

"You can only give up."

"Eh?"

She laughed and he was at a loss for words, but she soon continued.

"It's the same with idols. As an idol, people say all sorts of things about you. If it gets out that you're dating a boy, your fans will panic and say you betrayed them."

"Ha ha. That's definitely true."

"So you can only give up. After all, they're saying that about Hoshino Yuri, not about me. Of course, I don't think of that as an entirely separate identity, so I do worry like you sometimes. People think of Hoshino Yuri as

someone a lot more wonderful than I really am, but that's just due to bad luck."

"Bad luck?"

"Yes. I'm Hoshino Yuri because of bad luck. The things I did just so happened to be received well by people and my looks just so happened to be what people like. This is just an issue of whether you realize it's all due to chance or not."

Yuuko smiled as she spoke.

"Then the reason I have the suit...?"

"That's the ultimate case of it 'just so happening' to work out that way. Someone might try to take that from you, but it's the same as me being Hoshino Yuri. Being an idol is something you borrow from the fans. If I announce my love or do something mischievous, it would immediately be taken back by them."

"I guess that's true..."

"So while you're borrowing it, you can do what you want with it."

"But there's nothing I really want to do."

"What? Of course there is. You want to protect those around you, don't you?"

Her casual comment made him feel like she had seen straight through him and it discouraged him a little. He felt like a horribly simple person.

"Yeah... I guess I am that boring..."

"That's completely normal, so there's no helping it. It's surprisingly normal for important jobs to be done by people who can't think of anything more than that. It just so happens that there are things that no one but them can do."

Yuuko gave a mischievous smile.

"What is it that only a normal person can do?" he asked.

"Reveal people's feelings. The people around you are thinking about the empire, society, and other large concepts, right? People like that can easily lose track of their own feelings, so you need to remind them."

That gave Hiroshi a kind of understanding. The people around him did often seem to set aside their own feelings.

"Come to think of it, you're right."

"Yeah, so you should become the kind of hero you can be. Become a hero that expresses everyone's feelings."

"I see... You might be right. No, you are right," he muttered to himself.

"There's still something I want to do."

"Heh heh. I'm glad I could help," she said proudly. "My experience as an idol isn't just for show."

Suddenly, an unpleasant noise came from Yuuko's handheld device.

Her expression changed and Hiroshi picked up on it.

"Don't tell me..."

Yuuko checked the device and displayed a coded message.

"It's begun. It's really begun."

She gave an uneasy look to Hiroshi.

"The war has?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head. "Remember the strange person who appeared before the Republic's fleet and won't listen to us? They've started to attack."

"The new demon king... Sakura Kei..." muttered Hiroshi.



"Sorry. I have to go."

Yuuko stood up and energy filled Hiroshi's eyes.

"I'm going too."

"Eh?"

She turned toward him as he stood up.

"I finally see what I have to do and what I can do."

He stretched and slapped his own face to psych himself up.

Then he smiled at Yuuko.

"I realized this thanks to you. Thank you, Yuuko-chan."

Yuuko had never seen this look on his face before, so she blushed.

"Wow, how manly!"

Chapter 3: Fear Falling from the Sky

After falling into the jungle, Akuto groaned in pain while holding Keena.

"That isn't something to mimic on the fly like that..."

"Ah ha ha ha! You were surprisingly good at falling on the leaves."

Nonimora laughed happily as she watched Akuto. She had landed on the ground with almost no impact at all by gradually jumping down from leaf to leaf while softening the impact with each tall leaf.

Akuto had tried to mimic her, but he had been holding Keena and most of the branches had broken under his weight. He had fallen straight to the ground, so he might have been seriously injured had it not been after the fall that the mana had cut out.

"Are you okay, A-chan?"

Keena was clearly worried about him.

He did not want to too readily say he was fine, so he moved his body a bit before nodding.

"It seems so. The lack of mana is really obvious. These trees really must be absorbing it."

"That means the hard part is only just beginning." Keena sounded worried. "And we only have the rice I brought with me."

Korone fell from the sky after a slight delay because she had used a parachute.

She landed a short distance away, and after they waited a little longer, she appeared through the trees with the parachute wrapped around her hands.

"It seems I cannot use mana," she said. "I can use my internal battery, but combat is out of the question. For the same reason, I cannot produce any tools. If I eat like the rest of you, I can convert it into energy, but I will not last more than two weeks."

"That makes this difficult. We really are going to have to walk out of here."

Realizing this might be more serious than he thought, Akuto placed a hand on his chin.

But Nonimora spoke up cheerfully.

"Don't worry. The island is small enough to walk from one side to the other in just a few days. And the trees here were modified long ago."

She ran forward, shinnied up a nearby tree, and jumped down while holding what looked like a large ball.

"You can eat this fruit. They grow all around, so we won't have trouble finding food. Also, some trees glow at night and some produce water."

She threw the spherical fruit toward Akuto.

When he caught the fruit and looked closely at its hard skin, he saw thin lines much like the stitches on a soccer ball. When he put some pressure on it, the skin easily broke open and he found a white fruit inside. Nonimora's expression made it clear he should eat it, so he tore off a piece of fruit. It did not seem to have much moisture and it felt like tearing off a piece of a sponge. He put it in his mouth and found it was halfway between bread and potato.

"I see. So it's a mass of carbohydrates."

"Yeah." Nonimora nodded in satisfaction. "It's the blessing of nature."

"Can you really call this natural after modifying it so much?"

He was simply honestly speaking his thoughts, but she pouted her lips angrily.

"It's more unnatural to think the work of humans isn't natural. Whether you're talking about buildings or L'Isle-Adams, they're natural as long as they're functioning as they were designed to." She pointed at Korone. "What isn't natural is when they don't do what they're supposed to. Forcing yourself to do something or going too far is the one unnatural thing. Taking more food than you can eat, continuing to work when you're

tired, continuing to attack someone who has surrendered, or fighting back after you surrender and they stop are all unnatural. If you don't live naturally, you'll overlook the blessings of nature."

"I pride myself in my natural behavior," said Korone calmly.

Akuto was not sure what to say about Korone's comment, but he understood what Nonimora meant. And he wanted to understand that thinking even further.

"Then even a theme park is natural?"

Nonimora nodded.

"It was created to be an enjoyable place and that's what it is. Enjoying your life there is natural. A lot of people think that we're believing a lie, but what exactly is truth? We naturally want to know what is true, but taking that too far is unnatural. We can only know the truth as far as science can teach us. Thinking about the truth of anything beyond that is going too far."

Akuto had a feeling she was criticizing him, but he understood her point. He needed more flexibility in his thoughts.

"Even so, there are a lot of people who fully believe lies," he said.

She nodded again.

"That may be the case, but if we live naturally we can talk it out. Spending more than a day alone is unnatural. The problem with you main islanders is that you always live alone and force yourselves to meet other people."

"You're right about that," said Akuto with a nod.

Keena then spoke up sounding displeased.

"Hey, A-chan. We shouldn't be sitting around like this."

It was not like Keena to say that, but she was right. Akuto raised a hand and spoke to Nonimora.

"I apologize for cutting our conversation short, but we do have to start moving."

"That's right," said Nonimora. "Wherever we might be, we just have to head west. Once we see a tall tower, we'll know where the village is."

"A-chan, take the luggage."

Keena called over Akuto while standing next to a suitcase she had thrown out during the crash.

"Fine. By the way, do you have the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

She pulled the Jewel Branch of Hourai's box out from her own bag she carried.

"Here it is. Don't worry."

As she returned the box to her bag, she let out a quick shriek.

"What is it?"

"A bug flew toward me."

"A bug? Hey, are there bugs around here?"

Akuto found it odd since this was an artificial jungle.

"Even if this place is artificial, the plants are still alive, so they need insects to carry pollen. There's nothing that attacks people, so don't worry."

"I see."

As Akuto lifted up the suitcase, Keena wrapped her arm around his.

"Let's go."

"Sure."

He nodded and she began walking while pulling on his arm. But she almost fell forward because he did not move.

"C'mon, A-chan. You have to come with me."

She puffed out her cheeks.

"Um, Keena? I think that's east."

"Eh?"

"That's right." Nonimora smiled. "The direction all the tree branches are growing is east."

"Do not worry. I have a compass installed," said Korone while pointing accurately to the west.

"Mhh. Then let's go that way."

Keena began walking.

Normally, Keena would have been the most cheerful one. Even in this situation, she would have been walking along while singing.

"Is something the matter?" asked Akuto.

"Nothing," she answered.

But she refused to let go of his arm. Akuto was already restricted from flying and this made it all the more difficult for him to walk.

"Why don't you move away a bit?" he asked.

He was not being bashful and he was not annoyed with her. He simply felt it was inefficient to have her there. However, Keena did not seem to take it that way.

"Uuh... Don't say it like that."

She complained while looking up at him with teary eyes.

"What is with you?"

He was unsure what to do, so he simply walked west without saying anything more.

After a while, an obviously inorganic tower came into view through the trees. The only other tall objects on the island were trees, so it made a perfect landmark sticking up well above everything else.

"That's the tower, right?"

"Yes. It contains the ship to the star."

"It's there? How tall is the tower?"

"Less than a thousand meters I think."

The tower was a straight cylinder colored a shiny silver. They could not make out the details from a distance, but something like a glowing jewel was located at the very top.

"Even if we can see it now, we must still be pretty far away. What is that glowing thing on the top?"

"That is a sign. It's made to change color when the Formless Power is being used. The Formless Power produced good power only when being used by a good heart. Otherwise, it will eventually destroy the user's entire race. That sign lets us know if it's being used by a good heart."

Nonimora began climbing up a tree a short distance away.

"It will take two days if we keep walking this slowly. Night will fall soon, so find a sleeping tree. Also find something to eat and drink."

Given the height of the tower, she was probably right.

"Understood." Akuto shouted up to Nonimora. "What do you mean by a sleeping tree?"

"The trunks of some trees glow and they have big leaves. You just have

to take some of those leaves.”

That reply was followed by a few fruits flying toward Akuto.

Some were large and some were small, but he caught them all. Nonimora then dropped down and landed on his shoulders.

“I’m impressed you caught them all,” she said with a smile.

“Did you throw them at me assuming I couldn’t?” He smiled too. “That’s a problem.”

“What kind of fruit is this?”

Keena half climbed up Akuto’s arm and peered at the fruits he held.

“The small ones are food and the big ones have juice inside.”

Nonimora stood up and ran ahead, but she soon turned back and called toward the others.

“I see a glowing trunk over here. Let’s get some sleep.”

They followed and did indeed find a strange tree that gave off a faint light from its trunk. The straight trunk looked like that of a palm tree, but it also looked like a fluorescent light sticking vertically from the ground.

"Is this made to help anyone who gets lost here? It seems a little too convenient to me."

"If too many people lived here, the trees would be gone before long."

"Does your village have a restriction on children?"

Akuto tried to continue the serious conversation, but Keena tugged on his arm and cut him off.

"Forget about that. I want to eat."

Keena looked unexpectedly troubled, so he put down the suitcase to create a place for Keena to sit and began peeling one of the fruits.

"Sorry. Are you hungry?"

"That's not it..."

Keena's odd lack of energy worried Akuto.

"If anything is bothering you, just tell me."

"Mh," she groaned. "I'm fine."

He was unsure how to respond to that.

"Fine, but do tell me if there is something."

He tried to be as kind as possible, took the soft, futon-sized leaves that Nonimora carried over, and cleared the rocks from the ground.

"The sun is setting, so let's eat and go to sleep."

Nonimora called over Keena and Korone and then sat down.

"This might be hard for you if you're not used to it, but it's only for one more day," she said. "You can rest easy knowing this is the only night you'll have to do this."

"I'll be fine, so worry about Keena," said Akuto. "But if we eat like this for too long, we might not get enough sodium, so we can't keep this up. And in Keena's case, the lack of rice might be the problem."

He turned toward Keena, but she restlessly ate the fruit and said nothing.

Once Nonimora finished eating, she immediately lay down to sleep.

"It isn't cold, but you can place the leaf over you if you want. I'd like to have hem-hem, but we need to preserve our strength."

She was snoring in no time.

"That's kind of amazing. Should we get to sleep too?" asked Akuto.

Keena nodded, but then said "excuse me" and walked off.

Akuto assumed she was using the bathroom and Nonimora had told them how to recognize the trees meant for that purpose.

"By the way..."

After Keena disappeared into the trees, Korone brought her face in toward Akuto after remaining fairly inconspicuous up to that point.

"Wah! What is it?"

"Now that the empress is not here, I would like to point out that she seems worried about something."

"I agree. I just wish she would tell me what the trouble is."

"I know what it is. It is you."

This answer surprised Akuto.

"Really?"

"It is because you are giving Nonimora-san too much attention," declared Korone.

"Well, I am talking with her a lot now, but that's because-..."

"I know you are not doing so maliciously. But please try to remember that the throne is a burden to her. Right now, you are behaving more like the demon king than a normal person. Of course, that is due to who you are, so it is unavoidable."

"That's going a little too far.. But it is true I may have been too focused on trying to do something about everything that's going on. Normal people don't talk about entire nations like that."

He was a little confused, but he somewhat understood.

"Precisely. But it is also true that the empress must think about the larger world for a while. And that larger world may even go beyond the level of nations."

"You mean the Formless Power?"

"That power seems to be connected to her, so it is only natural she would feel uneasy. Unlike you, she does not have the confidence needed to wield such great power."

"You may be right."

Akuto felt embarrassed over his own nature. Nonimora had a sort of philosophy and he had something similar, even if it had a different focus. On top of that, he could sympathize with Nonimora's way of thinking. He sensed something in her that could reform the empire. But he now realized that Keena wanted him to move away from that. All of the girls around him were unusual in some way or another. Keena was especially unusual, but her lifestyle was not all that different from a normal girl's.

"I need to apologize."

"Apologizing is not enough."

Korone readily rejected Akuto's suggestion.

"Eh? Then what am I supposed to do?"

"That is simple. You make love to her. Or as we seem to be calling it recently: hem-hem."



"C'mon, stop joking."

Akuto waited for Korone to reply, but she never spoke up to admit it was a joke.

"You aren't joking?"

"I am fairly serious."

"Fairly?"

"About 90%. The remaining 10% is sexual teasing."

"Y'know..."

"At any rate, the empress wishes to reduce her unease. I am not telling you to penetrate her. I doubt that is what she wants right now."

"Penetrate...?"

"That word choice was 90% sexual teasing. But be that as it may, please love her. Even embracing her would work."

"Hm.... You might be right."

Akuto began to seriously worry about the issue.

"I will now enter power-saving mode, aka sleep. Please take your time and deal with this."

Korone sat next to Nonimora and closed her eyes. She seemed to be restricting her own functions.

That was when Keena returned.

"The toilet tree is amazing."

She sounded excited and more like her usual self.

"You don't have to get into the details."

Akuto replied as he always would and rolled on his side. Keena lay down next to him and they remained silent for a while.

The sun had fully set and the glowing tree covered Keena's face in pale light. The leaves of the trees completely hid the sky and the occasional glowing tree in the distance provided dim light much like streetlights in a lonely town.

"A lot has happened," began Akuto.

"Eh?"

Keena sounded surprised.

"I thought I should apologize."

She then replied in an unexpectedly light voice.

"But you haven't done anything worth apologizing for, A-chan."

"Still..." His voice grew more and more serious. "I feel like I haven't been thinking about you much lately."

"Eh heh heh."

Hearing that, she gave a careless laugh and moved closer to him.

"If you finally understand, that's all that matters."

"It must be tough. For me, it's become nothing more than another part of everyday life."

"I wouldn't say it's tough," she whispered back. "It's somehow scary."

"Scary?"

"There's a me who isn't me."

"Yeah. I know about that to a certain extent."

"I think that other me can do way more amazing things than the real me. She might be able to do things I really can't do."

"I know that too."

He started to feel he understood the fear she felt.

"So when you're doing all this amazing stuff, I started feeling that you need the other me instead of me," she said as her voice grew quieter.

"It looked to me like you were getting along pretty well with that other you."

"That's what scares me. I can't tell how much of me is actually me. But there's still the normal me and I can't really do all that much..."

She began speaking more quickly to hide the trembling in her voice. Noticing that, Akuto looked over and she turned away, but not before he had seen the slight twinkling of tears in her eyes.

"Keena."

He called out, but she did not turn back around.

"So I felt like you were only paying attention to me for the other me and I was thinking about something I could do for you and that the other me couldn't do. I thought you might feel you needed me if I could have hem-hem with you."

As she spoke, she began sobbing enough to be noticeable from the side.

"The other me is like me in some ways, so she's still me, but sometimes I realize I've been doing things that aren't like me and sometimes I talk as the other me instead of me, so I wonder if the things I'm doing are really me or not."

Her shoulders started trembling as she began confusing even herself, so Akuto pulled her close and embraced her.

"Hyah!" she shrieked.

"Um... I'm not sure I can put it in words well, but I'll try."

He brought his mouth to her ear as if burying his face in her hair.

"Y-yeah..."

She had completely stiffened.

"You are important to me. I need you, but it has nothing to do with how useful you are. What's important to me is how you eat rice all the time and how you take naps next to me. What I need you to do is be with me for no real reason. Having no reason is the best reason for me."

As he whispered to her, he gathered strength in his arms.

She let out a short breath and trembled.

"Sorry. Did that hurt?"

"No. I was just really happy."

She began squirming and turned her body to face him.

"This is...kind of embarrassing."

Akuto blushed as he looked directly into her eyes.

She did the same.

"But it's better to face each other," she said while hiding her face in his chest.

"Yeah."

He moved up one arm and wrapped her hair around his fingers. While holding her head to his chest, he gently stroked her.

"That tickles."

She drew back her head but then raised it to look up.

Akuto drew his head back too and their gazes met.

Neither of them could look away now.

The silence was filled with nothing but the thick rhythm of their exhaled breaths and beating hearts. Tension surrounded them and it felt like either of their voices would cause it to burst.

"...Do you want to do it?" she asked.

Akuto was unsure what to say.

As time passed and he remained silent, they simply stared into each other's eyes.

He moved his fingers from inside her hair and slid them down the back of her neck.

She let out a quiet voice.

And...

"Don't have hem-hem in secret!"

Akuto and Keena moved apart as quickly as if they had leaped back.

They timidly turned toward Nonimora, but for some reason, the girl was drooling and fast asleep.

"She was talking in her sleep," said Keena in surprise.

"That's one hell of a thing to say in your sleep," complained Akuto.

But then the two of them laughed a bit.

"I think I'll go to sleep too," said Keena before innocently leaping into his chest.

"Yeah, it's about time we did."

He wrapped an arm below her head and she curled up on her side using his arm as a pillow and resting her knees on his thigh.

"But something's bound to happen next time."

"Eh?"

Akuto tried to ask what she had said, but he received no reply. She was already giving the quiet breaths of sleep.

"Milady, that would be difficult."

That pathetic-sounding comment was made by a young member of the Hattori ninja forces.

"But we have all the equipment here, right?"

Yuuko attempted to force through her request.

She was in the communications room of the headquarters at a port town a few dozen minutes by train from the capital. Four operators stood

in front of the communications equipment covering one wall, but Yuuko had asked their chief to send their own footage out to the imperial people.

While Hiroshi was being sent out, she wanted to do something to help him.

“That isn’t the issue. It is probably CIMO 8’s doing, but all our footage is being supervised by the cabinet. It would be technically possible, but no one wants to be responsible.”

The ninja in a military uniform drew back from and tried to oppose Yuuko who also wore a military uniform.

“The responsibility can lie with my father.”

“Please do not be ridiculous. Listen. The Hattori ninja forces specialize in information warfare and we do not want to be manipulated by CIMO 8, but this goes beyond authority. The entire network is being monitored.”

“Really?” asked Yuuko in surprise.

“Yes. In this day and age, anyone can send a guerrilla message over the network, but the cabinet office is somehow preventing any footage from being sent over the network. Not only is the news being censored, but it is being actively provided by the cabinet office. And it differs from the information we are receiving,” warned the ninja.

But Yuuko was not going to back down.

"Brave is heading to the scene. If we show them that, everyone will realize the truth."

"That may be true, but how are we going to prove that CIMO 8 wants war with the Republic? We can't do anything without that proof."

"We just have to find that proof at the scene."

"We cannot sacrifice the Hattori family for something so uncertain. Please understand, milady. If it does come to war, we will win, so everything else is a trivial matter."

"That doesn't make it okay. Everyone thinks it's okay to go to war with the Republic because they don't know what it is."

Yuuko gave a troubled look behind her and saw Yoshie and Keisu who Junko had called in to help.

"Unfortunately, the operator is right."

Yoshie folded her arms and thought. She had heard most of the details when she went to rescue Hiroshi from Rubbers and she had heard that The One had some kind of conspiracy.

"No one will believe this without proof. If it wasn't for our past experiences with CIMO 8, even we would probably laugh off this incident with The One."

"Then what are you saying we do? Brave is already on his way."

Yuuko pointed at the mana screen being displayed by Yoshie's handheld device. It showed the footage provided by Hiroshi as he was flying over a seemingly never-ending ocean. The footage was being sent directly to Yoshie, so it was not on the network.

"If the operator is right and we can't send this over the network, an electronic warfare expert must be behind it. This is superhuman. Their codename must be the Electronic Fairy or something like that."

Yoshie nodded repeatedly.

"That's enough of that."

"Really? Anyway, we have two possibilities. The first is to defeat this Electronic Fairy, but I don't think I can. It hurts my pride as a hacker to admit it, but I have no information to work off of here."

"And the other?" asked Yuuko expectantly.

Yoshie gave a bitter smile.

"That one's simple but difficult. We convince the prime minister."

"Eh?"

"The prime minister leads the cabinet and commands the military. At the moment, the prime minister is just doing what his intelligence office tells him to do. In other words, he's listening to USD."

"Oh, I get it. But there's no way we can do that!"

Yuuko pouted her lips, but Yoshie grinned.

"Even so, we still have a chance. If we send some choice information over the network, it will reach USD. And since he was betrayed, we can assume he doesn't like what The One is doing. At the very least, we can show him something. After that, it's an internal problem for CIMO 8."

"Do we really have to bet on something that might not work?" complained Yuuko.

Yoshie smiled in return.

"You were already planning to bet your entire family on something that might not work. A nice bet is pretty exciting, though. But when you get down to it, the show is only just beginning."

Yoshie fell into her old habits and started speaking more casually.

"About that show," hesitantly spoke up the ninja.

"What is it?" asked Yoshie.

"It really has begun now," he said nervously.

"So it's finally begun for real."

Yoshie compared the footage from Hiroshi and the CIMO 8 approved news. Rewinding Hiroshi's footage showed that a mana beam had fallen from the sky.

"Ah ha. So the first one to strike was their Codename Esper."

The censored news only showed what happened a few seconds later: a Republic submarine fired a missile.

"If only Brave's footage was clearer."

"He flies surprisingly slowly."

"Esper probably began the attack after sensing Brave's approach," muttered Yoshie. "That means Brave might not make it in time."

"Are you saying CIMO 8 planned all this?"

"Probably," answered Yoshie. "I bet it was them that cut off contact with the empress's private ship as well."

The ninja nodded.

"It would seem the Republic is attempting to avoid a fight. Instead of repeatedly attacking, they are fleeing while their king tries to make official contact. However, it seems the prime minister is doing nothing more than giving a curt greeting. Having the prime minister handle this is legally correct, but this would not have happened if we could contact the empress. They were trying to contact her earlier, after all."

Hearing that, Yuuko approached the ninja with a clearly displeased look.

"If you know that much, why didn't you stop this war?"

"Well..." He gave a troubled shake of the head. "When there are those in the highest levels who want a war, there is no way to stop it. Also, we didn't know it would turn out this way. Just think about it. The empire has not fought an external war in over a thousand years. In fact, there is nothing that could pose an external threat. We had never even considered the possibility of starting a war before."

"That's right. What everyone feared was the demon king devastating the empire from within. The only thing anyone talks about is not letting another demon king show up. But now that we've made external contact, it's obvious that this empire's entire system could become the aggressor. No, it might be that it already has."

Yoshie pointed at her mana screen.

It showed Kei sinking the Republic's submarines, one after another.

"Am I not going to make it in time?"

Hiroshi decided they must have planned it this way.

As he flew across the ocean that never seemed to end, it irritated him a bit how the lack of any obstacles allowed him to see the distant attacks.

—I tried to look so cool back there, but will I be able to do anything at all?

He was not fully aware what was going on between Kei and the Republic's submarines, but he could tell Kei was attacking the submarines in order to provoke them. He could also see the news being broadcast across the empire thanks to Yuuko and the others sending it to him.

The footage had a time lag and it was obviously manipulated, but a single story played out there: negotiations had broken down due to the Republic and they had started attacking the empire.

Footage of sinking submarines was already reaching him. He was about to catch up, but he was worried they had already been wiped out.

He heard a roar and a pillar of water rose high into the sky. Once he finally arrived, the battle was mostly over. He had happened across the final ship being sunk.

A large portion of the ocean surface was filled with bubbles from the destroyed and sinking submarines. A film of oil and scattered parts floated up along with the bubbles.

Someone Hiroshi had seen once before floated in the air above. Given the sequence of events, the boy had to have been there for several days without any supplies, but his beauty had not diminished in the slightest. Kei was just as elegant, bewitching, and cruelly charming as ever.

And the actions Kei had taken were just as...no, even crueler than his appearance. Unfamiliar people had been lifted up into the sky using his magic power. Their skin color was a bit different from the imperial people. The biggest difference was the fin-shaped things on their arms. It was obvious they lived in the sea, but their silhouettes were definitely human. Those humans were forcibly held afloat with expressions of pain. There were around thirty of them, so they were likely the crew of several submarines. Seeing a single demon king holding that many people in the air brought fear up from the depths of Hiroshi's heart.

Hiroshi uneasily predicted the even uglier and impossible to ignore moment that was coming.

With a casual motion, Kei telekinetically tore off one of their heads.

Blood spurted ten meters upwards and it poured down like a shower. Kei fixed even that blood in place. Like water floating in zero gravity, countless scarlet drops colored the surrounding space.

This was truly shocking to anyone who could estimate how much magic

power this would take, but it was even more frightening how much Kei was enjoying it.

The other people of the Republic grimaced in the air as they guessed they would be killed in turn. But Kei betrayed their expectations by ripping all of them in half at once. They remained conscious for a few seconds afterwards, so they all gained expressions of disbelief. Kei seemed to have been anticipating that reaction because he gave a satisfied smile after seeing their expressions.

Hiroshi saw it all clearly. He was using the zoomed-in footage from the camera on his suit, but he saw the expressions of the people from the Republic and the look on Kei's face.

After a short delay, the words cruelty, brutality, fear, and anger filled his mind. He felt something hard press against the core of his body and a hot emotion quickly filled him. He could hear nothing as something pressed out from within and threatened to explode. He was most likely shouting.

It was only then that Kei turned toward Hiroshi. He had likely known Hiroshi was there the entire time. It was possible he had hastened the killing because of it.

In a contrast to Hiroshi, Kei's expression was cool.

"Has anyone ever shown off a slaughter so beautifully? Were you the only one in the audience? Unfortunately, their king wasn't there."

Kei smiled gently toward Hiroshi.

His appearance was almost enough to cool down Hiroshi's heated head.

A giant sphere floated in the sky and it was made of countless smaller scarlet spheres. The droplets glittered in the sunlight. As they blew in the wind, fantastical rainbow-colored waves spread across the sphere's surface. The beautiful boy spread his arms in the center. It looked like a well-composed painting and it may well have been a piece of artwork made by Kei. He was aware of his appearance and ability, so he had used the lives of others to show them both off.

"I don't care about that! Stay where you are!"

Hiroshi charged in, ordered his suit to activate the mana canceler, and set all the weapons except the plasma balls on standby.

"Please don't rush this." Kei shook one hand. "The beauty has only just begun."

The scarlet sphere began to drop as if gravity had started working once more. Bloody rain poured down on the surrounding area.

The blood produced a rainbow.

It was most likely no different from a normal rainbow, but the colors looked horribly strange.

"Defeating you is easy!"

Hiroshi tore apart the rainbow as he flew, but Kei flew backwards to avoid him.

"I know that, which is why I'm running away. You're borrowing that suit, but it's yours for as much as you're authorized to do. Unfortunately, I don't know when it will be taken from you."

"I don't care!" shouted Hiroshi. "I'll do whatever I can! Stop running!"

Kei's actions and words were light as he evaded.

"No thanks. Since you still have your suit, it means he has allowed you to kill me. I did what I came here to do, so I just have to run away."

Kei seemed to slide through the air and he produced a transfer circle there. A moment later, he slipped inside it and vanished.

"Wait! What do you hope to gain with this!?"

Hiroshi's shout echoed futilely across the ocean as the bloody rain covered the surface.

<Calm down. We recorded the footage. Even if we can't make it public, it might reach USD.>

Yuuko's voice helped Hiroshi partially regain his calm. He was not aware of it himself, but he may have been shouting for a long time.

"Kita-san's equipment proved useful. I'm thankful."

He touched the camera and communicator attached to his suit's helmet.

"I'll return after filming the ocean surface."

He approached the area of ocean where the tragedy had occurred and recorded it. The blood had mixed with the seawater and lost its color, but sharks were already gathering around the corpses floating here and there.

<This is awful.>

He heard Yuuko, but he did not know what else to say. He could give into his anger and hurt the sharks, but it would accomplish nothing.

He then noticed that one of the objects being attacked by sharks was not a human corpse. A single dolphin was floating on the surface after presumably getting caught in the middle of the battle. Its fins had been bitten off and its white stomach was pointed upwards. A shark was biting at it from below and it would occasionally shake.

—If it was only caught in the middle of all this, I feel sorry for it.

As Hiroshi watched, he saw a different movement from the dolphin's stomach.

"Eh?"

The dolphin's stomach swelled up as if something was pushing from within.

Then a blade stabbed out from inside the dolphin and sliced its stomach open front to back.

"Someone's coming out."

Hiroshi prepared for a possible fight.

After the dolphin's stomach split open, an arm came out and Hiroshi instantly realized it belonged to someone from the Republic.

—Come to think of it, he said something about not getting their king.

The king had supposedly been aboard the advance fleet of submarines.

A young man with an imposing build appeared while covered in dolphin blood. Sharp eyes turned toward Hiroshi though the hair plastered to the man's face with blood.

"At the very least, I am the enemy of your enemy," said Hiroshi.



The Republic man slipped from the dolphin's stomach and into the ocean. Drawn by the scent of blood, several sharks approached the young man. With a flash of his knife, he grazed the tops of their noses which was enough to keep them away.

He lowered his head toward the ocean, placed the knife in a case on his waist, and rubbed seawater on his face. He used both hands to smooth his hair back, revealing the wild and fearless face below.

"It was painful, but I saw what happened outside. I do not know who you are, but I thank you for crying out for my men."

The young man's voice carried well and his tone held calm and sincerity.

"I am ashamed to be the lone survivor, but they went as far as to kill an innocent dolphin to save me. I cannot do anything to reward you now, but ask me anything once I end this. I am Marine, King of the Republic."

"I am Brave," said Hiroshi.

Marine nodded and started back into the ocean. In that instant, Hiroshi felt a stir in his heart, and he found himself yelling for Marine to stop.

"Please wait!"

"What is it?"

The man looked up and Hiroshi held out a hand.

"Let me work for you."

Marine looked puzzled.

"I have no reason to have you do that. Give it some thought and make sure this is not a momentary emotion."

Hiroshi was unsure what to say, but he held his hand out once more.

"Then at least let me work for you until you can meet the empress."

"The empress?"

"I have heard the situation. If you wish for a peaceful resolution to the succession issue, then we want the same thing."

After a moment of thought, Marine took Hiroshi's hand.

"I thank you, hero."

Meanwhile, Fujiko visited an apartment near the academy.

Normally, a young girl visiting an apartment would have a sexual undertone, but that nuance was wholly absent from Fujiko's visit. If anything, it resembled a break-in.

"You will be giving me answers."

She hung a rope down from above the apartment ceiling and wrapped it around the neck of the man sitting in the room. The tea table was overturned, the ramen bowl had rolled off and the noodles and soup had spilled over the floor.

"Wh-what answers?"

The man who kicked his legs and was unable to resist the lightly tightened rope around his neck had terribly unruly hair and bizarre glasses. He was Suzuki Issei, the former leader of the black magicians. He had protected the secrets of the black magicians until Fujiko – the very person strangling him now – had stolen them from him. After that, he had been captured by the priests, so he had wanted nothing more to do with her. But just as his life was getting back on track, Fujiko had appeared before him and there was nothing he could do.

“There is something I cannot understand just from the documents,” said Fujiko. “Or perhaps I should say there is something I was able to see because of the documents.”

She already had the black magician information she had stolen from Issei. It had almost all been technical information and had contained almost nothing on their network or origins. As such, that was what she wanted to ask about. As her elder, he would know more about the black magicians’ origins due to hearsay and his experiences.

“Is there a connection between the Republic and the black magicians?”

“Is that all you want to know? ...Oh, I guess there isn’t about that in the black magician database that my password let you access.”

He spoke while struggling to breath and pointed at his neck to tell her to loosen the rope.

She did so and asked again.

"Does that mean there is a connection?"

"I have no real proof, but it came to me as soon as I heard about the Republic's origins. When the empire was formed, I assume those who espouse absolute freedom left and made their own nation."

"I believe Kazuko said all such people died."

"You saw the database, didn't you? It says the same thing, so this is speculation on my part. They might have some records on the matter in the Republic. I don't know what you're so desperate to find, but if you seek absolute freedom as the ideal of black magic, you should join the Republic."

Issei's casual wording caused Fujiko to tighten the rope.

"Don't tell me you actually know nothing."

"Ah... Th-that isn't quite it. Let me tell you."

He cleared his throat to begin speaking again.

"You aren't making this up because you can't breathe, are you?"

"No, I'm serious. ...The demon king system has always been an internal thing. When you create a social system by building gods, everyone has access to all those resources. But to prevent people from killing each other, you set rules. And the one who deviates from those rules is the

demon king.”

“You mentioned this before.”

“Yes, but after learning about the Republic, I realized this only applies inside the empire.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if you reformed the current system and created a world based on the black magicians’ ideals, mankind would not be destroyed. The empire would be, though.”

Fujiko understood that much of Issei’s explanation.

“I see. Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“Yes, so even if the demon king starts a war, it doesn’t necessarily mean the destruction of mankind.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Fujiko.

“In that case, doesn’t it seem strange? If the demon king is just a weapon as Kazuko claimed, he has too much power. But if the demon king was created to truly destroy mankind as the gods claim, then he doesn’t have enough power.”

"If the demon king truly only has control over the empire's internal resources, it does not reach the scope of all mankind," muttered Fujiko.

No matter how heretical her thoughts were to the empire, her viewpoint was still bound within the empire. But once she freed her thoughts from that restriction, Issei's point made logical sense.

"Kazuko should have known, but she said the Law of Identity doesn't exist."

"She was lying. Either that or she didn't know the truth. It's possible she didn't. Even if the gods and demon king are complicit, neither the demon king nor the empire has the power to destroy humanity. If that power exists, it must exist outside. In other words, there is an external god. Or to be more accurate, there is a true god."

It made sense and it matched what Fujiko had overheard Yamato Bouichirou saying.

"You mean there really is a true god?" asked Fujiko half in fear.

"I don't like the idea either, but with this turmoil in the imperial family and the existence of the Republic, I have to assume so. You came to ask me this because you were worried about that, right?"

Issei removed the loosened rope and looked up.

Fujiko had already moved from above the ceiling.

—All of this suggests the existence of a true god? Who can stand up to a fear like that?

An unspeakable anxiety filled Fujiko.

Chapter 4: Colorless Flames

Junko viewed the ocean, but not in a romantic sense.

—No one in the empire has looked at the ocean like this before.

She was looking out the window of the headquarters quickly built on a viewing platform of a seaside town. The footage was being sent to the headquarters, but a manual that seemed to have been used since ancient times said that seeing the enemy with your own eyes was best.

Junko and the Hattori ninja forces under her command were in charge of relaying information from the front lines while her father commanded the actual front line unit. He could not head out to the front lines himself, but a member of the family had to be there to maintain their honor.

The land unit was gathered in that seaside town. Military land vehicles, soldiers, and air vehicles had been supplied to each division due to the emergency situation. Their guns were all turned toward the sea.

Several shadows were visible on the ocean horizon. They belonged to the submarines.

—But Yuuko said they aren't moving anywhere.

Junko had heard the situation thanks to an encrypted transmission from Yuuko, but she had not informed the Hattori ninja forces working here.

—The Republic's king must be an incredible person, but he isn't trying to start a war.

She could tell Yuuko was not lying, but it bothered her that the king named Marine had abandoned the battlefield. It suggested he had something more important to do.

"I hope nothing happens," she muttered aloud without thinking.

"Milady, kindness is taboo here," rebuked a Hattori ninja.

"I know that." She nodded. "But after seeing that..."

"That" referred to the footage of Kei sinking the submarines, but she had only seen the edited version. It had looked like the Republic attacked first and the later slaughter was not included.

She thought Kei was overwhelmingly powerful. That strength had not been an act. She did not know how serious the Republic had been, but the empire had been...no, Kei had been superior when it came to magical combat.

"I understand worrying about the damage to the Republic, but that kind of compassion is taboo."

"That is not what worries me. It scares me that Esper of CIMO 8 is accepted by the world."

Junko's concern came from the prime minister's announcement. He had said that the demon king had destroyed the Republic's submarines. Also, Akuto had supposedly become a "great demon king" after giving into the might of the empress and had then sent a subordinate demon king to handle the Republic.

"True. I doubt the government has control of him."

"That is not all. The people's reaction scared me. If this is viewed as the empire's secret weapon, none of them see a problem with it. Their view of the demon king is changing. I cannot believe that it has changed so much just by having an external enemy show up."

Junko's voice held more surprise than hatred.

"The empire's greatest fear is being seen as its greatest power. I do understand how you feel, but that seems to be what has happened."

Junko understood that too, but understanding it was not enough to erase the fear.

"In that case, how are we supposed to react if an even more external threat shows up? Do we rely on humanity's greatest weapon and confront it?"

"Now is not the time to think about that."

The ninja scolded her, but Junko could not accept it. She may have been instinctually sensing that the situation hinted at the existence of a true

god that she had believed was a lie up to this point.

"He was always saying that people viewed their surroundings as a story, but why do I feel such a great tragedy approaching because something has appeared that does not fit in the story?"

"Milady..."

"Sorry. I will do my job as the decoration on the front line. Then again, all we are doing is preparing for a conflict that might not even happen. And even if it does, it will be nothing more than a skirmish and there is no reason we should lose. Isn't that right?"

Junko spoke as if she did not believe it herself, but the members of the Hattori ninja forces nodded.

"Of course that's right, milady."

However, that answer did not come from the heart.

—No one can be strong at times like this.

Junko turned back to the horizon and let out a long sigh.

She began to wonder if everything happening now was a lie.

"If I head to that Merlai village, there is a chance I can meet the empress, right?"

Marine spoke to Hiroshi who was carrying him.

Hiroshi flew across the ocean, checked the coordinates of the Merlai village that Yoshie had sent him, and nodded.

"We still haven't received any word from them, but she had bodyguards. She should be fine."

Marine had asked to be taken directly to the empress. And if the Jewel Branch of Hourai was there too, that was all the better. Taking him there was sure to increase the odds of avoiding war. At the very least, it was a better chance than having the king return.

"Why did you only contact your country instead of returning?"

"The fact that we are a republic and yet have a king means that the king does not have absolute power. The congress of nobles has real power and I cannot stop them if they are in agreement."

"Will the nobles choose war?"

"We already hated the empire and they are sure to have seen what happened."

"I...can understand that."

"I contacted them to tell them I am alive, but the nobles are desperate to send out the military," said Marine. "I was forced to accept that much, but our goal is to seal the dreadful Formless Power using the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

Hiroshi realized this legend of the Formless Power was different.

"The Formless Power is dreadful? And why do you hate the empire? There's a lot I want to ask, so could you just go back to the beginning?"

"The Republic is a country made up of the people who broke free from the empire. They opposed the empire's rule that used the system of the gods and it grew into a conflict, but they lost and were forced to escape to the bottom of the ocean."

"Why the bottom of the ocean?"

"That was the only new land. It also helped that they were able to manipulate their DNA. But the biggest reason was..."

"The biggest reason was?"

"No, never mind. That is a sad reality."

Marine shook his head and Hiroshi did not press further.

"Since then, our nation has lasted just as long as your empire."

Interaction with the empire was forbidden and that was enforced to a large extent. Even so, the people of the Republic have visited the empire on occasion. There are plenty of rumors of that."

"There are plenty of rumors here of monsters appearing from the sea, but I find it hard to believe the gods would overlook that."

"We are a mana culture just like you, so we would have been recognized as unbaptized foreigners. We have our own system to replace the gods and our system allows everyone to use magic equally."

"And that doesn't lead to conflicts?"

"People can only use magic on the level of their personal mana. We have forbidden modifications to increase an individual's mana like that demon had done and that restriction is strictly enforced. There are differences in magical strength between individuals, but it is only a slight variation. It might help to think of it like a society where people are allowed to carry weapons."

Marine had referred to Kei as a demon.

"So that's why you lost."

"We had mana weapons and mana cancelers, but his strength simply outdid all that. I now know that the human will's control over mana particles is the greatest weapon. At the same time, I have greater respect for our ancestors who cast that aside and created the Republic. There is only one power that can overcome that."

"Which is?"

"A sealed weapon from before our mana civilizations. It is known as a nuclear fusion explosion. I assume you have at least heard of it."

"I know it is the ultimate form of energy. Of course, it can't be controlled at all."

"Our mana civilizations were created by casting that aside."

"Are you saying that's what the Formless Power is?"

Hiroshi was taken aback, but Marine smiled and shook his head.

"No, it isn't. In the Republic, the Formless Power is said to be the power that gave rise to our minds. It is believed to bring about true liberation. Personally, I say it must be researched before it is used."

"The empire says it is the power that leads the people," said Hiroshi.

Marine gave a thoughtful look.

"I want to say a legend is just a legend, but that may be too optimistic. Then again, it is also somewhat nihilistic to say there is no such thing as a power that leads the people."

"The legend told by the Merlai says it will bring about a good result if used by one with a good heart and it will bring a bad result if used by one with an evil heart."

"It seems strange to be using good and evil as such an absolute standard. Of course, 'true liberation' is far too vague as well. But since it gives an image of destruction and creation, I do not think we should deal with this power too lightly."

"In that case, you should get along with the empress and her bodyguards."

Hiroshi smiled and Marine saw it through the open mouth of his visor.

"Then is no one trying to release that power?"

Marine smiled as well.

"No. There's nothing to worry about," said Hiroshi.

The Merlai island finally came into view.

"We'll be there soon," said Nonimora excitedly.

The tower they had been following looked very close now. In fact, it had grown so large they could not see the whole thing at once. If they craned their necks upwards, they could just barely see the light at the peak.

"We need to make contact once we reach the village. A lot of people have to be worried. Oh, right. Is it even possible to contact the empire from the village?"

Nonimora nodded at Akuto's question.

"You can use mana in the village, so you can make contact."

"Then can we hurry back with a transfer?" asked Korone.

"Good question. It should be possible," agreed Akuto.

But Nonimora shook her head.

"The village doesn't have enough energy for a transfer all the way back to the empire."

Just as mana was not infinite, the energy it used was also limited. They may have lived in a magic civilization, but they were merely using the energy supplied to them. The imperial mainland transmitted energy through the ground or through the mana itself. This made the energy usable in almost any part of the empire's territory, including over the sea, but the Merlai village only had the energy from their own energy facility due to the surrounding trees that absorbed mana.

"While you can make contact, it will be passing through the high-altitude mana, so it won't be very effective," added Nonimora.

"But you were really powerful," pointed out Akuto.

It had taken an incredible amount of power to grow the plants that had enveloped the school and Nonimora's speed during the battle had been remarkable.

"I mentioned it earlier, but I used a portion of the Formless Power for that. I have a good heart, so it produced good power. It isn't that difficult a thing."

She smiled innocently.

"The Formless Power, hm? I don't know what that is, but I have a feeling we should follow the legend of the Merlai since you have the closest contact with it."

"Anyway, I want to eat some rice when we get there," said Keena.

"You haven't had rice in a while, come to think of it."

"Unfortunately, we don't have much rice. We eat moco-moco."

"Ehh?"

"Don't worry. It's really good. And when you're visiting a different place, you should eat different things. By the way, you're in a much better mood than yesterday. Did you have hem-hem with him? If you do it right, that

can really bring harmony between a guy and a girl."

As she spoke, Nonimora elbowed Keena in the butt.

"I already told you..."

Keena blushed and wasn't sure what to say.

"A-anyway, the jungle's opening up."

Just as Akuto said, their vision opened up as they stepped out from between giant trees. A wooden village was visible beyond some shorter trees and grass.

"Oh, it's the village. I've made it back."

Nonimora sounded deeply moved.

The village was made up of ten to twenty buildings. None of them had multiple stories and they all had simple designs with grass roofs. They were located on either side of a central road and a river flowed by on the other end of the road.

"Hey!" called out Nonimora.

Faces started appearing in the windows. They all had the same skin color and large, curious eyes as Nonimora.

"The tribe leader is back!"

"Call the elder!"

After those voices, a crowd of villagers appeared. Not many seemed to have been working and their ages ranged wildly. There did not seem to be a difference in the features of the children and the adults. They all wore rough clothing, but some wore the same style of clothing as Akuto's group.

"This village likes to keep things loose. You might find some things rude, but worrying about it will only make you hungry. Try to let loose while you're here. Don't let your pakk-pakk get loose, though. Guys don't like that."

With that comment, Nonimora walked further into the village.

As Akuto, Keena, and Korone followed, the villagers peered curiously at them.

"Eh heh heh."

Keena waved at them and the villagers waved back.

Korone made a V-sign and some of the villagers began copying her. When Korone noticed, she brought her right hand around behind her head and tugged up on her left ear. The villagers copied that with a smile

as well. She then wrapped her arm around her neck to bring her right elbow up to her face and licked the tip of her elbow. The villagers tried to copy her, but they looked confused and surprised when they could not. Finally, all of them were desperately trying to bring their elbows to their faces.

"Stop giving them strange new fads," said Akuto.

Korone expressionlessly rotated her elbow at a strange angle.

"This is how to tell if someone is a L'Isle-Adam. Feel free to use it if you are ever having difficulty determining if someone is one."

"Who gave you that ability?" he complained.

Meanwhile, Nonimora said they had arrived at their destination.

At the center of a park on one end of the village was a building that looked modern even by the empire's standards. The village contained a mixture of inorganic and organic structures and it was unclear which one was dominant. Simple organic houses were preferred for residences, but facilities even more modern than the imperial mainland were used for the few infrastructure maintenance buildings.

However, the park building was of a different style than those for infrastructure maintenance. If anything, it looked more like the series of structures they had seen in the moon city. Most likely, the buildings of the dawning age of the empire had looked like that. The tower that was said to seal the Formless Power rose up from that building like a thick tree.

"Is this the building you said had the ship to the star?" asked Akuto.

The building was about five stories high and about the size of a general hospital. It was too small to hold a spaceship.

"Yes. The ship isn't all that big. It's about the size of a few trucks from your empire."

As Nonimora said that, an old man walked out of the building. His eyes and mouth were buried in the thick wrinkles covering his face. His face seemed to be made from nothing but a few horizontal lines. Akuto guessed he was unimaginably old.

"Oh, elder!"

Nonimora energetically raised a hand.

One of the elder's wrinkles opened and a voice escaped.

"Welcome back. Who are they?"

"The empire's current empress and her bodyguards," explained Nonimora.

Keena and Akuto greeted the elder and he let out a light groan that might have been a laugh.

"Ho fo ho. I assume that means the Jewel Branch of Hourai is here?"

"It is."

Keena pulled the box from her bag and Nonimora explained.

"Yeah, she brought it with her. Empress Soga Keena here said she would give the position of empress to me, but after speaking, we decided to come here."

The elder nodded.

"That is fine. Please, come in."

He began walking again and the others followed him inside.

Akuto's intuition told him the building had been created as a laboratory.

"The Jewel Branch of Hourai is the key for the ship to the star, but that is not all."

The elder began speaking despite no one asking any questions.

"Nonimora said it is needed to use the Formless Power."

“True, but that wording is not the best.”

The elder boarded an elevator, waited for the others to follow, and pressed the button for the fifth and highest floor. The elevator ascended, the door opened, and they stepped out into a large floor with no walls. It was filled with a thick cylinder that was likely the tower entering the building. A portion of the tower’s wall had a hole in it. But the word “hole” was not quite right as the cylinder was hollow. The hole felt more like a door to the inside.

“This is the ship to the star.”

The elder pointed inside the door.

Just as Nonimora had said, a streamlined ship about as large as a few trucks was located inside. But if they had not been told it was a ship, they might not have viewed it as one. It looked more like a missile sitting on its side. It was silver, it had no windows, and it had no writing on the surface.

“The Formless Power is sealed inside here,” said the elder. “Even if we have nothing, we can use a portion of that power.”

Nonimora nodded in agreement, but Akuto found that answer difficult to accept.

“What exactly is the Formless Power?”

“It is a mysterious power. But I suppose that does not answer your

question. If I had to explain it, I would say it is like the human mind. It is as if tens of thousands of human minds were gathered together. This is only a portion of it here, but it is still a tremendous power.”

“It doesn’t seem like you would need a power like that very often,” said Keena.

“Precisely,” agreed the elder. “But there is something you must know. You should think of the Formless Power as a living being. It is said the Jewel Branch of Hourai chooses the emperor or empress, but you could also say that the Formless Power chooses them.”

“Why do you know that?” asked Keena.

He touched the side of the tower and a mana screen appeared.

“I am the third generation of researchers. But there is nothing more to research, so all I can do is pass down my knowledge.”

“What do you mean there’s nothing more to research?” asked Akuto.

The elder gave the same strange laugh as before.

“Ho fo ho. Once I knew it was a collection of human minds, there was nothing more I could do. If you have some knowledge, then you might understand this better: this ship to the star contains a device to hold an energy field in place. In other words, it is nothing but an empty container. But when devices to measure electric potential and magnetism were attached to the container, it reacted. That reaction is displayed at the top

of the tower. The subtle changes are shown with color.”

“It’s empty but it reacted? Are you sure it wasn’t just a mistake?”

“I have detected energy coming from empty space. The Formless Power might be an infinite power.”

“Infinite...”

Akuto was dumbfounded.

“But the most mysterious aspect of all is why I referred to it as a living creature. The reaction from the Formless Power can be changed with human emotion. As Nonimora told you, the people who have lived in this village long enough can borrow a portion of the Formless Power.”

Akuto found something about that hard to accept.

“Are you sure that isn’t us jumping to conclusions? How could a power understand human emotion?”

“Naturally, everyone thinks of that as impossible. But they understand when it comes to a living creature. Emotions are nothing more than input and output. The process may be quite complex, but set rules can be quickly determined. However, the bigger problem is the fact that this power is welling up from empty space. This actually seems to support the unscientific idea that, if complexly bonded amino acids cannot produce consciousness, that consciousness must come from empty space. And to put it simply, this is the truth, so there’s no use arguing.”

"The truth?"

"The Formless Power has taken a liking to Nonimora. She seems able to communicate with it the best. Even dogs can prefer some people over others, right? But the foundation of that preference cannot be explained with science."

"Whether you accept it or not, the truth is the truth, huh?"

Akuto stopped arguing, but that brought a problem to the forefront.

"Then did you send Nonimora out in order to...?"

"Yes. The empress needs to come up with an approach for dealing with this power. At the very least, it is a problem that the Formless Power likes her even more than Nonimora."

Even if Akuto did not accept the elder's explanation, this power did seem able to amplify magical power. It was a political problem if the empress could use it.

"But first, you should return the Jewel Branch of Hourai," said the elder.

"Return it?"

Keena sounded confused, so the elder pointed at the ship to the star.

"The tower, ship, and everything else here save the Formless Power were created during the dawning age of the empire and I know what they are for and how to use them. The Jewel Branch of Hourai is the same. It is meant to control the Formless Power, but it is primarily a safety device that can erase it."

"It erases it?"

"That is why it is said to choose the emperor or empress. It is thought that the Formless Power behavior is similar to deciding whether it will disappear or not."

"Then it isn't like only the one using this can use the Formless Power, right?"

"People near it such as Nonimora can also use it, so do not worry."

"Then..."

Keena pulled the box from her bag and removed the Jewel Branch of Hourai from that.

It was a wooden branch that gave off a dull light and had a few jewels attached.

The elder touched the surface of the ship to the star and holes for spheres to be inserted appeared.

"Those don't look like they're for a branch," said Keena in confusion.

"Remove just the jewels," said the elder.

She removed the jewels along with the small branches they were attached to. The main central branch remained as a short staff with a round stone at the end.

She placed the jewels in as if sticking small branches into the holes opened in the ship to the star. The holes had opened in just the right sizes for the stones, so they fit perfectly.

"That should do it, right?"

Keena lightly waved the staff that had been the Jewel Branch of Hourai, but she began looking around the area before seeing what it did.

"What is it?" asked Akuto.

"A bug," she muttered while continuing to look around.

"A bug?"

"Yeah, there's a bug. ...Kyah!"

As she screamed, the Jewel Branch of Hourai was knocked from her

hand.

"What!?"

"Eh!?"

Akuto and Nonimora cried out because the Jewel Branch of Hourai flew perfectly horizontally instead of falling to the ground.

At first it seemed to be flying on its own, but the insect clinging to it began to grow larger.

"Ohhh!?"

Nonimora could not help but cry out in surprise.

It had only been as large as a small fly to begin with, but it had grown to about thirty centimeters.

"So that's it! He's who destroyed the ship!"

Akuto caught on instantly.

A thirty centimeter human was flying while holding the Jewel Branch of Hourai which was as long as him. He seemed to be a magician who could grow and shrink and he had likely been aboard the ship from the beginning.

"I was waiting for this moment!"



The voice was high-pitched due to the small size, but it was indeed the voice of a human man.

He wore a body suit and mask that must have been able to grow and shrink with him. The suit's design was not recognizable, but he was clearly a member of CIMO 8.

"Insects must be exterminated!"

Korone swiftly pulled a gun from her bag, but the enemy seemed to have predicted that. He flew toward the floor's emergency staircase with the same speed as an insect. It almost looked like he moved instantly.

"If all you've got is speed...!"

Akuto held his hand out toward the emergency staircase and used mana to restrain the insect man.

But...

"...Eh?"

He was confused because he could not use mana properly.

"What is going on?"

Seeing that Akuto could not feel anything, Nonimora ran forward. She was fast, but the insect man was faster and smaller. He escaped her grasp and quickly escaped outside through the ventilation window. She began angrily stomping on the stairway landing.

"He got away!"

"Sorry. I couldn't use mana properly," said Akuto as he arrived at the stairs after her.

"That is most likely due to the low amount of energy in this area," said Korone. "The amount of energy you can use was reduced and you could not handle that unexpected gap."

"He took it from me. What do we do?" asked Keena.

"I cannot say this is not a problem," answered the elder. "But it should be fine for the time being. Anyone can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai, but the Formless Power will only respond to a member of the imperial family."

"Then I guess we've avoided the worst case scenario. I don't know what CIMO 8 is plotting, but..."

Akuto was cut off when Keena received a telepathic call.

"Ah," she said as the signal came from her handheld device. "The villagers were so much fun I forgot to call. It's from the old man."

Keena pulled out her device, answered the telepathic call, and a screaming voice immediately responded.

<Your Majesty! Thank goodness you're all right!>

The voice belonged to Yuuki Jouji of the Imperial Knights.

"Not so loud. Um, our ship suddenly crashed and..."

She tried to explain, but Jouji cut her off while sounding on the verge of tears.

<More importantly...well, that is quite important too, but I have news about the Republic!>

Jouji began to explain the current situation.

As Akuto listened in, he realized the “worst case scenario” he had mentioned before might be happening after all.

While traveling over the Merlai island, Hiroshi’s visor displayed a warning and he informed Marine.

“Sorry, but this doesn’t look good.”

“What happened?”

“We’re surrounded by a type of field that is this suit’s weakness. It would take too long to explain, so just think of it as the enemy trying to drain the suit’s energy.”

“There is mana here, so I can fly too. I thank you for carrying me this far. I would not have made it on my own.”

After thanking Hiroshi, Marine moved away and asked him a question.

"Does that mean there is an enemy nearby?"

"Yes. This is someone working with the one you called a demon."

Marine's expression changed when he heard that.

"Then they are my enemy as well. I will make up for what you lack."

"That would be a huge help. They're straight ahead and about fifteen degrees up."

Hiroshi used the information on the visor to locate the energy and informed Marine. The man seemed to see the target because he nodded.

A flying ship floated there. It was about the same size as the empress's private ship. It was near the limit of what an individual could own, but the exterior made it clear this had not been bought commercially. It was colored black to hide its affiliation and obvious weaponry was left exposed.

"Their organization is named CIMO 8."

Hiroshi spoke the name bitterly.

"The mana here is thin and there is not much energy. I'm not certain I

can manage, so we might have to fall back.”

Despite the clear hatred in his eyes, Marine spoke calmly.

That made him seem very much like an adult to Hiroshi.

“If we can destroy the virtual alternate dimension producer, I can fight freely. As long as we manage that, we won’t lose.”

“Understood,” said Marine with a nod.

“I’ll do what I can while my energy lasts.”

Hiroshi flew toward the flying ship and watched the energy gauge in shock. It was lowering much faster than normal.

“What?”

He tried to figure out why. It likely had to do with the black flying ship. Not only was it dispersing mana, but it seemed to have its own energy unit as well. It seemed to be the same system as the Brave suit and it was absorbing the suit’s energy.

“Not good... Sorry, but I have to back off!” shouted Hiroshi.

He quickly accelerated toward the jungle below to avoid death from his suit running out of energy. Down there, he could at least release the suit

and hide himself.

—If that's the same tech as the suit, this must be USD's doing.

He descended to the jungle while silently apologizing to Marine.

After Hiroshi descended to the jungle, Marine began fighting the flying ship, but Hiroshi was not the only one watching.

They were fighting in the airspace near the Merlai village, so it was visible from the ground there.

"The insect man flew that way. His mana is almost undetectable, but I have good eyes."

Nonimora pointed toward the flying ship. She had run outside the building in pursuit of the stolen Jewel Branch of Hourai, but it seemed she had been too late.

"So he has allies on that ship."

Akuto tried to gather mana in his hand to use magic, but it did not work very well. He had yet to grow used to the thin mana and low energy of the land.

"He said some place called the Republic has attacked and war is about to break out."

Keena looked at Akuto worriedly.

"I don't like not knowing the full situation," he muttered. "And who is that fighting up there?"

Korone held out a telepathic communicator. Ever since he had become able to easily make telepathic contact on his own, he had not used that sort of item.

"A telepathic call?"

"It is from Kita Yoshie-san. It seems she has all the information."

Sure enough, Yoshie was in the same headquarters as Yuuko and she began explaining the situation with almost no introduction.

<There are three important points. At the moment, there are three imperial candidates: Keena, Nonimora, and Marine who seems to be fighting now. He is the Republic's king.>

"Why is he fighting CIMO 8?"

<CIMO 8 crushed the Republic's advance unit. Brave rescued him and they headed your way in order to find a peaceful solution in a discussion between the leaders of the Republic and the empire. Incidentally, they've been jammed once again. The signal from Brave cut out.>

"Could this get any worse? I'm ashamed to admit it, but we just had the Jewel Branch of Hourai taken from us."

<Well...that certainly isn't good. But war hasn't broken out quite yet. The front line is on the coast. Hattori Junko-kun is waiting at a coastal city there. After some discussion with her father, they've somehow managed to get the Republic warships on the coast to hold off on starting a battle. That's the second important point.>

"I want to get back there as soon as I can, but there's too little mana here to transfer back."

<Try to find a way to get back and take Marine with you. I'm not too optimistic about this. I said CIMO 8 crushed the Republic's advance unit, but it was done by someone who seems to have the same abilities as you.>

"The same as me?" asked Akuto in surprise.

<Yes. They seem to have successfully turned a normal human into a demon king using the cells of yours they stole a while back. That demon king is currently staring down the Republic's fleet and no one can control him.>

"Does CIMO 8 want to start a war?"

Akuto raised his voice.

<It looks that way. But there's this eeriness to it. It's like there's

something hidden behind it all. Um...It seems there's some conflict within CIMO 8 and one of them is trying to annihilate mankind. Also, this new demon king is on that person's side. That's the third important point. That one's on such a huge scale it surprised even me.>

"That's what's been going on while we've been wandering around the jungle?"

He was now convinced that CIMO 8 had intentionally sent them into the jungle.

"Then I'll go rescue him."

Akuto looked up into the sky, but the battle between the flying ship and Marine was already over. Marine seemed to have lost consciousness and he was being sucked inside the ship's hatch while still floating.

"It looks like I'm a step behind on everything today," he said bitterly.

As Marine entered the ship, someone else flew out.

After descending into the jungle, Hiroshi had made sure he was far enough from the flying ship and released his suit.

"Tch. What am I supposed to do? How useless is this thing?"

He began complaining about the Brave suit, but to his surprise,

someone answered him.

"Sorry about that, but there is still a way."

"Eh?"

At first, he thought the bracelet that transferred the suit in had spoken, but his expression stiffened when he looked in the direction of the voice.

"I am aware this is quite selfish of me."

Kento appeared from the jungle. In other words, this was USD, the mastermind behind the entire incident.

"Kh!"

Hiroshi frantically prepared to fire a mana sphere, but realized there was no mana around him. He felt surprise and fear at this fact, but he managed to suppress the fear when he noticed the surprisingly relaxed expression on Kento's face.

"Are you my enemy or my ally?"

"Are you that insistent on having a clear answer to that? Unfortunately, not even I know the answer."

Hiroshi realized that bizarre statement was unlike Kento's usual daring

self.

"What is with you? You released my suit when he was made into a demon king, but you let me fight out at sea and now you appear before me. What are you trying to do?"

As Hiroshi raised his voice, Kento adjusted his glasses and spoke calmly.

"I created the ship up above, but The One is currently aboard it."

"What about it? You already said he betrayed you and I refused to help you. If you have something to say, then out with it! And as I said before, if you have a way of defeating that dog, then tell me!"

Hiroshi's emotions exploded out, but Kento cut in.

"The One plans to give the Jewel Branch of Hourai to the Republic's king."

"And?"

"Not even I know what will happen if he uses that power. But I have a vague idea what it is."

"And what is that?"

"The Formless Power is the sealed minds of all the people from another

dimension and he is trying to free them."

Even as frustrated as he was, Hiroshi took a moment to think.

"I don't really understand what that means, but that isn't just because I'm stupid, is it?"

"The One made use of the fact that it is so confusing. He made it sound like it would release further power into our magical civilization."

"You don't like getting to the point, do you? I'm sure there are all sorts of annoying theories behind this, but what are you trying to say?"

"I want to make sure the Republic's king does not use the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

Hiroshi laughed at that.

"Then don't worry. He isn't that kind of guy. If you want to stop it, then just stop that ship. You made it, right? I'm sure you can stop it just like my suit."

"I of course made sure I would be able to stop it at any time, but I can't do that now."

"Why!?"

"The One has taken a hostage."

Kento's expression stiffened.

"I didn't take you for the type to have that kind of weakness. So I just have to save that hostage, right? The One can't see us here, so he won't know you asked me to do this. Who is this hostage?"

Hiroshi did not even bother hiding his irritation and he noticed some hesitation on Kento's face.

"What is with you? Is it because of this hostage that you're acting weird?"

"Kei," cut in Kento. "The hostage is Kei."

"Eh?" said Hiroshi in surprise. "You mean the guy who was turned into a demon king?"

"Yes." Kento nodded. "I investigated that device after the fact and I discovered an extra system The One added into the process. It allows him to freely make Kei self-destruct."

"How could someone do that to an ally!?" reflexively shouted Hiroshi.

Kento shook his head sadly.

"That's just the kind of allies we are."

"You don't seem all that nice yourself. ...But wait. If you were only allies on that level, how does he qualify as a hostage? And your line of work is dangerous, so you had to know he would die eventually!"

Hiroshi came to a certain realization as he spoke.

Kento's expression and behavior held the unease of worrying for another. He noticed the same thing he felt when he was worried for Yuuko.

"Wait. Don't tell me..."

Hiroshi shook his head. Kei was male, but he did have a bewitching aura.

Kento slowly nodded.

"I am worried about Kei," he said.

That fit with Kento's overall behavior, but Hiroshi still had difficulty accepting it.

"So that's your weakness. But so what? You had to have seen what he did to the people of the Republic!" he shouted. "Wasn't that why you didn't take my suit from me then!?"

Kento suddenly lowered his head.

"Please."

"Eh?"

Hiroshi's momentum ground to a halt.

"Will you please stop him? Even if he has to die, I want you to kill while he does what he has chosen to do. I don't want him to be killed by The One."

Hiroshi was unsure what to say.

"D-don't be selfish! He was so cruel... And it was his decision to become a demon king. It was all so he could do that. So...so..."

But as he thought, he realized Kento's wish was the same thing he wanted to do.

And more importantly, Kento had bared his emotions and bowed his head.

Hiroshi was confused, but something inside him produced the answer to it all. He was aware this was an answer Akuto could never give. He had often wanted to be like Akuto, but he now felt like he had found a path all his own.

"Depending on what happens... I really will kill him."

Hiroshi gulped as he finished speaking.

"That is fine. He would prefer to die after being defeated. That's the kind of person he is."

"But the suit might not be enough. Can you at least give me some information on The One?"

"Don't worry. I said there is still a way, didn't I? I will release the suit's functionality. You should be able to manage like that. Just follow the suit's voice instructions."

Once they began talking about an actual strategy, Hiroshi's head gradually cooled off. Even so, he was aware there was no need to change his mind.

"Where is Kei?" he asked.

Kento's eyebrows moved slightly.

"He should be confronting the Republic's army to ensure their king will do what he is told. That king saw Kei's earlier slaughter, so further attack should make for a decent threat."

"Is that how The One does things?"

Hiroshi put on the Brave suit and waited for Kento to make his adjustments. The man used a cord to attach a small device to the back of the suit and began manipulating the device.

"If you can power me up, why head for Kei rather than the ship?"

"I'm not sure you can stand up to that ship and The One would try to threaten you with war as well. In that case, it's better to stop Kei and reduce the possibility of war."

"Makes sense. But will I make it in time?"

"I'll give you a transfer spell. Use it once you approach the mainland and secure enough mana and energy."

"Understood."

Kento finished his adjustments to the suit and nodded toward Hiroshi.

"I'm counting on you."

"Sure. I'm not going to forgive you, though."

As Hiroshi flew away, the battle with The One's ship was already over and he did not see Marine anywhere. The man had not fallen down, so he had either been captured or agreed to negotiations.

"Why you are going out of your way to give me that?"

Marine was embarrassed by his circumstances, but his gaze remained resolute.

"Can you not simply accept it as kindness?" asked The One.

He was curled up on a large and shallow bucket-shaped cushion just like a dog.

This was the flying ship's lounge. Marine sat in a chair placed before The One and he was not restrained in any way. He simply looked like a man sitting with a dog.

But the situation created great tension. Marine had lost yet survived and he had been invited into the ship. That was humiliating to him, but he was not the type of man to despair or lose all hope over that. The One seemed to have realized that.

"We believe this power brings about true liberation, so I cannot use it so lightly."

Marine looked toward the Jewel Branch of Hourai that lay on The One's cushion. At first glance, it looked like a normal stick, but Marine knew how special it was.

"I am aware your legends treat it that way, but what do you think 'true

liberation' means?" asked The One.

"Liberation is the Republic's ideal. The empire refers to it as black magic, but we are the founders of that ideal."

"But you have already achieved that, have you not?" rebutted The One. "Magic has been freed for all. Or do you begrudge them for making you live under the ocean for so long? Do you view liberation as the defeat of the empire?"

"That desire does exist in me as an emotion, but that is not the core of my ideals. Acquiring eternity is the true meaning of liberation."

"And?"

"We believe that the soul exists. A true soul, not the soul spoken of by the gods who created the empire."

"In other words, there is an afterlife? It seems the people of the Republic are actually more religious than the people of the empire."

The One's tone was mocking, but Marine's calm remained intact.

"You can think that if you want. Many of us do not fear death."

"Because death is liberation?"

"They also believe death should be given to the empire and that the Formless Power will do just that. In other words, they believe that one can freely control death with the Formless Power."

Marine had the look of a man faced with a difficult question. The fact that so many of his people felt that way showed just how greatly they resented being bound to the sea by the empire.

"From the look on your face, I take it you do not believe that," said The One.

"Correct." Marine nodded. "It is wrong to desire destruction from the Formless Power. It is even worse to think all mankind should become nothing more than souls."

"But," emphasized The One.

"But?"

"But we know that to be the truth. That is, that humans can become an eternal thought entity."

Marine sensed something from that statement.

"You mean...it's true?"

He could not believe it, but The One began explaining as if it was all obvious.

"Yes. After all, the Formless Power is made up of the souls of another race. The people of the empire are plotting to use that power as they see fit."

Marine did not immediately reply, but after some thought, he gave a small nod.

"And what are you trying to do? Aren't you part of the empire's government? If so, I must ask what your true intentions are."

The One stood up from the cushion.

"I see. My true intentions, hm? In that case, I must start by revealing my identity to you. I am what you refer to as an alien."

Marine's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Oh?"

His voice held a note of disbelief, but The One continued undeterred.

"The Formless Power is made up of my race's souls. I wish to release that power because that would be the liberation of my race."

"What will happen if they are liberated?" cautiously asked Marine.

He was using this answer to judge the truth of The One's words.

"Revolution," answered the dog calmly. "The very revolution you desire from the bottom of your heart."

"Revolution!"

The calm left Marine's voice for once.

That showed this desire truly was hidden deep in his heart.

"You wished for a future where the people of the empire and the Republic would truly share mental bonds and you saw that possibility in the Formless Power. Am I wrong?"

Marine remained silent, but not out of opposition. He could only imagine that The One had seen right through him.

"You can think of the Formless Power as something that grants the people's wishes." The One's voice grew louder. "If it is released, my race's souls will resonate with your human souls, it will influence your human hearts, and you will gain a magical power...no, a power even greater than magic. Isn't the ideal of the empire's black magic and the Republic's magic to have a power that is directly influence by the human mind? That lies here. Release the Formless Power and you liberate us all. This will create a true interaction between our hearts and that will provide you with new magic."

"New magic..."

Marine could tell his heart was violently shaken.

The dog before him seemed like the demons spoken of in legends. The dog tempted him with precisely what he wanted.

But Marine managed to retain his calm.

"I need more time. Releasing that power should not be a spur of the moment decision."

He wiped sweat from his brow.

Their long time at the bottom of the ocean had created an intense desire for a world of mutual understanding. He had always thought of it as nothing more than a dream, but he could not help but feel something tremble inside him when the real possibility lay before him.

"Actually, I think you should make your decision sooner rather than later."

The One shook his head and displayed a mana screen.

It showed the demon named Sakura Kei facing a Republic submarine unit.

"What!?"

Marine was left speechless.

"Will the nobles of the Republic listen to what you say?"

The One smiled cruelly.

Marine was now certain that this alien could read human minds.

He grew concerned he could not oppose such a being, but he tried to bluff.

"They will. And I am sure there are those who love peace in the empire. It is too soon to assume it will develop into-..."

"That's right," cut in The One. "War does not happen so easily. But your obvious concern shows you do not trust people that much."

"Why do you desire the release of the Formless Power enough to use threats like this?" asked Marine bitterly.

"Because I wish to see what humans truly desire. There are some coincidental and intentional aspects to the beginnings of wars. But if humans truly brought forth what they desire, what would happen? I must find that answer."

The One laughed.

"It's nothing but curiosity?" asked Marine in astonishment.

"No. There is a deeper meaning, but you humans would not yet understand. Now, it is time you bet on this. There is no time left. Will you do nothing and watch as your nation is destroyed in war with the empire or will you use the Formless Power and grant the wishes of the Republic's people?"

After The One's somewhat theatrical statement, something happened in the footage on the mana screen. The submarines fired a missile into the air.

"No!" shouted Marine.

He knew what that missile was. Unlike anti-air or anti-surface missiles, the trail of smoke began to stretch high, high into the sky.

"Oh? That is the weapon that was abandoned in ancient times, isn't it?" asked The One mockingly.

"It is a nuclear missile," said Marine in despair.

That ballistic missile would rise high into the sky and drop down, so it was difficult to shoot down and could attack from a long distance. The warhead was nuclear, so a direct hit could break through even the mana civilization's strongest shield.

"So this is your countermeasure against a demon. I do not know whether to call this an unfortunate fate or mankind's just deserts."

Marine wordlessly reached out toward The One's nihilistic smile.

"What is it?"

The devilish dog gave a derisive laugh.

"Don't play dumb. This is enough. I don't want to give my answer in words."

Marine approached and the dog's smile widened enough to show off his gums.

"Now, what is it humans desire? And what is it you desire?"

The demon grabbed the magic wand with his mouth and handed it to the man.

"Please make it in time."

Hiroshi rushed, but the suit simply could not move fast enough.

<They haven't done anything yet, so don't worry too mu- ...Eh? The Republic just fired a missile?>

He heard Yuuko's panicked voice over the communicator.

"Yuuko-chan, what do you mean?"

<I'm not sure. My sister sent this information. It seems they shot a missile straight up like a rocket.>

"Is it turning into a war?"

<We don't know yet. Father hasn't given us any orders yet.>

"Please don't rush to action. If I can quickly defeat that demon and show we aren't all like that, we can still salvage this."

Hiroshi checked the mana density and the amount of energy filling the atmosphere.

"Still not enough to transfer."

As he was growing impatient, he heard Yuuko screaming over the communicator.

<Sis? What? What happened?>

"Wait... Yuuko-chan? What is it?"

He received no response.

<Sis! Sis! Answer me!>

He only heard Yuuko shouting and he could hear tense voices in between her shouts.

"What's going on!?" he shouted into the communicator.

Finally, he received a response from Yoshie.

<She's started panicking, so I took over. It looks like something has happened on the front line. We should have footage of it soon. Try to stay calm and watch it.>

Yoshie's tone was much more serious than usual.

"Wait. You can't mean the missile hit them..." he said.

<If only it had. This is worse.>

"What?"

<You could call it the collective form of their malice. Something is falling from the heavens. This is not despair or fear. It's malice.>

For once, Yoshie's roundabout expressions seemed suited to the

situation.

And then the footage reached Hiroshi.

"Wait a minute. What is this...?"

"The Jewel Branch of Hourai has already fallen into The One's paws," said the CIMO 8 member who could shrink his own body.

"And the Republic's king is with him. Why are you trying to have him use the Jewel Branch of Hourai?" asked Akuto.

The sky was controlled by that CIMO 8 member and the countless giant insects he had created. They resembled rhinoceros beetles and they confronted Akuto with clear ferocity.

The One's flying ship floated in the sky past the insect army. After delivering the Jewel Branch of Hourai there, the man had sent out these insects to cut off Akuto's pursuit.

"That's right!" agreed Nonimora. "You're really annoying! Let us through! The Jewel Branch of Hourai is dangerous if someone with an evil heart uses it!"

She floated in the air with Akuto as they tried to at least approach The One's ship, but they could not fly as normal due to the insufficient mana density and energy quantity.

"There is no reason to be in such a hurry. By the way, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Codename Morlock of CIMO 8."

The man named Morlock was currently half the size of a normal human.

"I appreciate the greeting, but I'd rather you answered our question."

"You will find out soon enough, but I suppose I can tell you now. To put it simply, we want war."

"That's all?"

"For me personally, yes. There are others with more complicated ideas, but their plans won't advance without a war. This will result in a wonderful world once it is all over."

Morlock grinned.

"He creeps me out," said Nonimora with a look of disgust.

"So if you get down to it, is CIMO 8 just insane?" muttered Akuto as he took a combat stance. "I couldn't do anything before, but I'm getting used to this lower level of mana. I will be making my way past you next time."

Morlock gave a mocking laugh.

"Not a chance. I'm an expert at conserving energy. You cannot hope to defeat me even with two of you. I always leave half of my body in a virtual alternate dimension, so I can change my size in reality and more efficiently use energy. Do you understand what that means?"

Morlock was attempting to brag about his ability, but another voice cut in.

"A-chan! It's an emergency! It's about Junko-chan!"

Keena shouted out from below where she had been in contact with the palace.

Her panicked state brought a change to Akuto's expression.

"What did you people do?"

He turned a cold glare toward Morlock.

The look was enough to make the man flinch back despite his previous confidence.

"Uuh... Y-you can see that for yourself. Heh...heh heh..."

"What is that?" asked Junko.

As she looked out the window of the front line headquarters, she saw a trail of smoke rise up from the sea.

"It is a ballistic missile," explained a member of the Hattori ninja forces. "It ascends to satellite orbit and then descends from there. Don't worry. We can take it out as it falls. We have already given instructions to the aerial unit. Unless it has a nuclear warhead, we can suppress the explosion itself."

"Unless it has a nuclear warhead?" she asked.

He nodded.

"We cannot suppress a nuclear warhead with mana, but that technology was abandoned long ago. They wouldn't be using one."

"I hope you are right. Anyway, this means a war is beginning, doesn't it?"

She sounded disappointed.

"It may be unavoidable now," he agreed.

Suddenly, Junko felt a chill on her spine.

—What is this unpleasant feeling?

She looked around the headquarters and it seemed everyone there shared the same feeling.

"Hey, did you feel something?" she asked.

People responded in turn.

"Yes. I have a bad feeling about this."

"This is not a magical phenomenon. How strange. There's no reaction in the mana at all."

"Is it coming from above?"

Someone looked up into the sky.

Junko followed suit and looked up from the window.

It was starting to rain.

—Rain? There was no sign of this earlier and isn't the weather controlled in this region?

But as the beads that looked like raindrops fell on the ground, those areas burst into flames.

"What!?"

She stared intently at it.

She could not see the flames clearly. The flames had no color and they merely caused the air to shimmer like a heat haze.

But they did not vanish. The colorless flames gradually spread across the ground. The grass burned, the green turned to black, and it all collapsed into ash. The same thing occurred everywhere that the raindrops fell. Rather than raindrops, it may have been beads of fire itself that was falling from the sky.

"Ahhhhh!"

A member of the Hattori ninja force cried out in fear at the sight before him. Junko followed his gaze and saw the source of his fear. The rain of colorless flames had started to melt the outer walls and windows of the viewing platform being used for the headquarters.

"Do not panic!" shouted Junko. "Try to use our shields!"

But she only received screams in response.

"We already are!"

"What!?"

The rain poured down over a wide area and started to turn everything there into ash.

"I-is this the enemy's weapon?" asked a frightened voice Junko did not recognize.

"I do not know. But this cannot be happening!"



The flames were neither red nor blue and they burned through everything around them. The viewing platform itself was on the verge of collapsing. The view from the melting window showed the outer wall loudly crumble and then start to turn to ash and scatter in the wind.

Junko's face twisted in fear.

This was not the fear of facing certain death.

That rain of colorless flames looked like the malice of humanity to her.

She trembled and crouched down.

She felt as if depthless malice was bearing down on her.

Everyone watched it happen.

The invisible flames fell from the sky and burned through the city and the troops.

Everyone interpreted it as intense malice.

"Assume for a moment that divine punishment exists," said The One. "You think of it as coming from heaven, but it would only feel like divine punishment if someone down here wished for it to happen. After all, if good people are burned away, it would be viewed as nothing but an unfortunate event. That means this is the reflection of someone's heart. You wished for this. You of course wished for the elimination of the missile and that is what happened. But you also granted the wishes of the Republic's people. Some of them must have wished for the empire's army to be turned to ash."

Marine could tell better than anyone that The One was not lying. His connection to the Formless Power told him that power had truly granted the wishes of the Republic's people.

The mana screen showed the worst possible scene. From overhead, it looked like a giant gray circle had been drawn on the ground. But that had once been a city. It had all been burned away and an area of gray rubble and ruins had been created in an instant.

That seaside city resembled a painting of hell. No life was visible as far as the eye could see. The only movement was the ash blowing in the wind and the crumbling pieces of concrete.

"I have seen a true hell and a true demon."

As Marine muttered in despair, he stared at the demonic dog before him.

Akuto stared at Morlock.

However, he could see the footage in the back of his mind and he could hear the voices. The same footage that Keena was receiving on her device was reaching him even more clearly. He could only manage this thanks to his growing control over the weak mana. He had grown perfectly accustomed to the thin mana. Or perhaps the information reaching him had given him an unusual level of focus.

<We're receiving no response from the temporary headquarters at

Katsuura!>

<Based on the information coming in from surrounding regions, an area with a radius of four kilometers was lost. The safety of the garrison is unknown!>

<Sis! Answer me, sis!>

<The reason for the loss is unknown. It might be a new enemy weapon.>

Various transmissions were flying about, but Akuto focused on a single point out of all that information.

"Is the eldest daughter of the Hattori family who was commanding the garrison dead?"

He asked the question in a low but surprisingly calm voice.

"H-how should I know?" replied Morlock.

He tried to force a mocking tone but failed. Everyone there could tell his voice was trembling.

"I am asking your opinion. Do you think she is dead or do you think she is alive?" asked Akuto.

"What good is it to ask? And there's no way she's safe. Several kilometers were burned away. If anyone had survived that, they'd have made contact right away."

Morlock was not sure why Akuto had asked that.

"So you do think the people there are dead. And what do you think about that?"

"Wh-what are you talking about? This has nothing to do with me. I didn't do it. From what I know, that was the manifestation of the Formless Power. I've heard what it does and it must have granted the desires of the Republic's people. You can't blame this on me."

While Akuto remained perfectly calm, Morlock grew more and more flustered.

"I asked you what you think about it," further pressed Akuto. "You don't have to think about whether it's your fault or not. But if you can't find anything to say, it means you didn't think anything of it. Not a single thing."

"W-wait. Have you gone insane? So what? No one would think anything about that. It's just a bunch of people dying."

"I just wanted to ask," said Akuto indifferently. "For some reason, I am reluctant to kill. More than that, I've never liked influencing other people in the first place. You can call it cowardice if you like, but it meant that I would never feel like killing someone no matter how angry I got."

Morlock seemed to guess where this was headed and his tension seemed to reach its limit. He stopped forcing himself to fold his arms and he quickly prepared for battle.

"Enough talk! You're saying you're gonna fight, aren't you!?"

Akuto quietly shook his head.

"Fight? I may have been willing to do that before, but have you still not caught on? I believe I've found a reason actually worth beginning a unilateral slaughter over."

A change came over the air around Akuto.

A moment later, his expression changed to something filled with more insanity and fear than anyone had ever seen before.

Afterword

Thank you yet again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

The events of this novel begin a new multi-volume story. The plans for the rest are still relatively vague, but I do know the next volume will continue from this one. My personal hope is to continue for a few volumes, but you can look forward to whatever ends up happening.

I've written this so anyone who watched the anime could begin with Volume 10 and understand most everything, so please take opportunity to start reading. If you want to read from where the anime left off, you can start with Volume 6. That pattern works too.

Speaking of the Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou anime, all the DVDs and BDs have been released. This is your chance to see all of it, so I hope you buy it.

Recently, I have been watching satellite broadcasts. The minor sports are fun, but the biggest impact came from the old idol movies. Those are the ones with Kikuchi Momoko or the Onyanko Club as the leads. They are all strangely enjoyable in a way that confuses you as you watch them. I'm not talking about the standard opinion that the idols are terrible actors. I'm talking about how they made the most bizarre movies as if anything would be fine as long as it had an idol in it. Even so, it gives you a feeling that no normal work can. I know I shouldn't let it influence me too much, but it gives me this strange desire to create.

Lastly, I must thank everyone related to the series as well as the readers. There will be no more media-mix developments for the time being, but the novels should continue for a while longer, so please stick with me.

Now, then! It looks like we can enjoy this even more!



み01-02-12

水城正太郎

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT12

HJ文庫

HOBBY JAPAN







「なっ……何を……！」

「動くな。へムへムなんだから、
脱ぐのは当然だろ？」

登場人物紹介

はっとりじゃんこ
服部 紬子

阿九斗に恋する純情なクラス委員長。「色のない炎」によって焼かれてしまう。

まいあくと
紗伊 阿九斗

けーなの支配下に置かれているが、必然的に戦争に関わることに。紬子を焼いた「力」に對し激しく憤る。

えとろふじ
江藤 不二子

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。

きけーな
曾我 けーな

日本の現皇帝陛下。世界の力ギを握る存在？果たしてその正体は？

みわひろし
三輪 寛

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行っていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。

木多淑恵

魔王戦争の後、阿九斗のことを冤に入り、協力する。

マリッ

共和国の王子。「無貌の力」を開放してしまう。

リライ白石

小粋な帽子がトレードマークの生徒会長。

ノミモラ

マーライ族の族長。「無貌の力」を守る使命を担っていた。

佐倉啓

CIMO8の一人。阿九斗の細胞の一部を使い魔王化する。

ザ・ワン

CIMO8の一人。今回の事件の首謀者。その狙いは？

倉橋賢人

CIMO8の一人。「無貌の力」を利用しようとするが、ザ・ワンに出し抜かれる。

Prologue

Laws and morals were different, but only those in power could truly proclaim that fact. As a general principle, laws were to be determined by morals, but those very laws were supported by immoral violence.

That fact hit home with Kurahashi Kento as he witnessed an action that opposed the law.

That understanding may have been due to his mind working at several times the rate of a normal person's. Someone else would likely have been petrified at the sight.

No blood had been shed and no change had come over her appearance, but she had certainly lost her life.

Her beauty remained, but her eyes were opened wide and all light had vanished from her pupils. The loss of strength from her muscles left her jaw hanging loose and her limbs dangling limply. She hung down near the ceiling like a hanged corpse, but there was no rope around her slender neck. She floated in the air and an invisible power held her there.

A single girl stood below that corpse.

She wore a white dress and looked up at the corpse with a bright smile.

She stared up at what had been her stepsister.

"I just got rid of her a bit. She was in the way. She was ignoring me and trying to have fun on her own. How could I allow that?"

—Trying to have fun?

Kento contemplated what the girl had said while turning back toward him.

The dead...no, murdered girl was named Katayama Madoka. She had been his lover and that was undoubtedly what this girl meant by "trying to have fun". Was she disgusted by the sexual pleasure so commonly seen during puberty? Whether that was the case or not, her words were likely based in jealousy.

—Jealousy?

However, Kento knew that could not be the case. He was one of the few people who knew this "girl" was actually a boy who anyone would think looked like a girl.

His name was Sakura Kei.

After his parents had died, Madoka had taken him in and raised him as her younger brother. Of course, she had done so out of more than pure good will.

Kei had abnormal talent in magic.

Mana reacted to the state of one's mind, but that mana was nothing more than nanomachines that were made to mechanically react to brainwaves. The effect the brain waves produced in the mana depended on the image in the individual's head. Some visual images and some special combinations of words functioned as triggers, but a lot about magic was still unexplained. For that reason, magical talent was essentially an inborn trait.

Madoka and Kento had been a pair of top class researchers in the field of magic, but that barrier had prevented their research from progressing past that point. Once they had thoroughly investigated their own inborn talent, they could only search out a new talented individual.

Kei's parents had died when he was young and he had been left with an orphanage. That orphanage had contacted Kento's laboratory via a church to report that Kei had used magic when he was still too young to even speak.

When Madoka and Kento had arrived to investigate, they had been told no one had taught Kei how to use magic. Their investigation had confirmed that he had indeed controlled mana to throw a toy at a friend's head.

Neither Madoka nor Kento knew at whose ear the demon had whispered, but it had not even taken a week for the two of them to pull some strings, have Madoka legally adopt him, and begin to raise him as her younger brother.

Kei had quickly displayed how unique he was. He had created many different original pieces of magic. Even when they had the same effects as traditional magic, the details were always changed in some way. This

was to be expected, though. In the few years since he had come to the lab, no one had been allowed to provide him any education, magical or otherwise. He had been raised with an emphasis on individuality.

However, his uniqueness had shown itself in all parts of his life. He had behaved however he liked and Madoka and Kento had been forced to allow it because his value had lain in his mental state. However, his wild side had exceeded simple open-mindedness and his behavior had grown highly abnormal. Once he had developed a powerful healing magic, he had made a “game” of injuring Madoka and healing her. That was but one of many examples.

It had all been for the sake of developing unique magic, but the sacrifices had been great. They had later taught him not to do to others what he would not want done to himself, but it had been too late. That had simply made him prove he was able to sever his own arm without batting an eye.

His magic had eventually reached the point of modifying his own body. Essentially, he had performed cosmetic surgery on himself. As he had grown, he had grown more beautiful. During puberty, he had become a mixture of the feminine and the masculine. His beauty had been enough to mesmerize any who saw him. Even Kento and Madoka who had been used to seeing him would find themselves captivated by his appearance.

At the time, they should have realized he would only be growing more beautiful if he intended to use that beauty for his own convenience.

He had gradually gained more freedom. In the beginning, they had planned to slowly educate him and return him to a normal lifestyle, but the pace of that normalization had been much faster than Kento had

expected. In fact, he had a feeling Kei himself was putting together the research schedule.

Nevertheless, Kei had been obedient around Kento, so it had taken him several years to grasp the situation. He did not learn what had been happening behind the scenes until Madoka had died and he heard it directly from Kei.

"You and my sister never caught on until the end, but why didn't you when I was doing this specifically so you would notice?"

Kei's words contradicted themselves.

"What...did you do?" asked Kento.

Kei laughed.

"I fucked everyone on the research staff."

"Fucked...? Wait. You mean..."

"I had sex with them. I could use magic just a bit better than any of you expected. I would need to read and control their minds to do that."

Kei sounded perfectly calm, but Kento was completely shaken.

He had realized the staff was being influenced by Kei's attraction, but

he had never even considered it had developed that far. This was partially due to his own distance from that type of thing, but the large number of men on the staff was an even larger reason.

"You can't mean..."

"I do. You can't think about me like a normal purpose. That's the entire point."

"Then..."

"When it comes to beauty, the differences between male and female are meaningless. In fact, it's completely natural for a beautiful boy to love both men and women. I've been studying history, and the moral standard that only a man and women can have sex was a later addition."

Kei gave a bewitching smile.

"Surely you can make a counterargument against this being my skill in magic. I think the only thing I used mana for was to make myself beautiful. Reading and controlling their minds was done with a more traditional kind of magic. Instead of using mana, I read their minds from their actions and words and I seduced them. It's an old way of saying it, but they used to call that the magic of love."

Kento was left utterly speechless and Kei wrapped his arms around Kento's neck.

"You're the only one it didn't work on, but that's exactly why I want to

work hard and win you over. Do you know what I mean?"

Kento trembled as he felt terror wash over him for the first time in his life.

—I've created a monster!

But that was not what scared him.

The fear came from that monster turning interest and good will toward him.

—I might be able to control this monster. No, only I can control him.

"I can't believe I didn't notice how you felt."

Kento took Kei's hand.

If someone had ever actually made a deal with the devil, it had to have happened much like this.

Chapter 1: The Prelude to Destruction is Always Silent

From the look on Morlock's face, it was clear he had instantly lost all confidence.

He was trembling and sweating.

However, those standard changes went farther than normal.

Sweat poured down his face without end and that sweat was scattered about by his intense trembling.

The sight that had so badly scared such a skilled spy was Akuto. The boy's expression was truly demonic. The usual attractiveness of his face made it all the more frightening now that it was twisted with pure and undiluted intent to kill.

"I was trying to find a good enough reason to kill you...and now I've found it."

As Akuto spoke, all mana vanished from the surrounding area. Even if it was in small quantities, mana existed in all parts of the atmosphere, so its disappearance meant Akuto had instantly gathered it all in his hand.

"Impossible!" shouted Morlock without thinking.

Even the most powerful magic users were unable to accomplish anything like that. Moving the energy that allowed mana to function was one thing, but moving the mana itself required the mental power to

grasp the locations of each and every particle.

Akuto moved his finger ever so slightly.

That was enough to pin Morlock in the air and pull him forward as if by magnetism.

"Please don't kill me!"

"Don't kill him!"

Two voices overlapped.

One belonged to Morlock and the other to Keena.

"Don't kill. An excellent sentiment. And I would prefer to not have to kill."

Keena's expression relaxed in relief.

But those words sounded crueler than a death sentence to Morlock who had experienced many brutal battles in the past. After all, not a single bit of the cruelty had left Akuto's face.

"P-please stop! Please forgive me!"

Morlock pleaded until he was hoarse, but Akuto rejected his pleas with

a wave of his right hand.

"If you're going to beg for forgiveness, don't attack others in the first place!"

The man's body began to shrink. He specialized in doing just that, but he was not causing it this time.

"P-please stop!"

When Morlock shrank, his body did not actually reduce in size. He would send most of his body into a virtual alternate dimension and reform his body with mana. However, Akuto was using that against him.

"Gyaaaaah!"

His scream trailed on and on as his body grew smaller and smaller.

Akuto sealed Morlock in the virtual alternate dimension and set his size at no bigger than a few dozen mana particles.

The minimized Morlock looked like he had been drawn by filling in squares of graph paper and he could not even speak.

"Eeeeeee!" shrieked Morlock in the virtual alternate dimension.

However, that shout did not reach the real world.

All he could see in reality was a microscopic colorless world. Dust floated like asteroids and wind blew him around with greater speed than a storm and greater thickness than seawater. At this rate, he would be unable to speak with anyone as he lived in this lonely world for as long as mana existed.

Soon thereafter, he was swept away by the wind and disappeared to some unknown place.

"A-chan... What...what did you do?" asked Keena worriedly.

"I sealed him in a virtual alternate dimension and made his body microscopic."

Akuto's tone was calm, but his words contained great heat. His anger had yet to cool.

"A...-chan..."

Keena shuddered and a mixture of fear and sorrow filled her voice.

"Y-you can't do that..."

"I didn't kill him. I did as you said," he explained coolly.

"No... That wasn't what I said to do. Surely you understand! You wouldn't normally do that kind of mean thing to me!"

Keena was crying and confusion filled Akuto's eyes.

"But he's working with the person who killed Junko!"

His voice was so rough that Keena could not say anything.

A heavy silence followed, but Korone suddenly interrupted.

"I will not argue against vengeance, but do you truly understand the situation?"

As a L'Isle-Adam, Korone was calm and she was right about Akuto not being the same. It was also possible he did not fully understand the situation.

"The situation? What's there to understand? The person who caused all this is over there!"

He pointed toward The One's flying ship.

Akuto understood that a member of CIMO 8 and the representative of the Republic were onboard and he could guess that Marine had used the Formless Power. However, the conclusion he reached was far from normal.

He would attack that ship and defeat the two of them.

That was the one and only conclusion in his mind.

He was being motivated by nothing but anger.

"Ohhhhh!" he roared.

He kicked off the ground and that was enough to whip up the wind.

Keena and Korone covered their faces.

"Don't!"

By the time Keena shouted, Akuto was already far into the sky. She could see him flying directly toward the ship while enveloped in a shockwave.

"Empress, please seal the demon king's power," astutely instructed Korone.

"Right," agreed Keena.

She had forgotten, but the empress had the ability to seal the demon king's – and therefore Akuto's – power. She had been using that ability to release his powers when necessary, but now she felt it was more necessary to seal them.

"As empress, I seal the demon king's-..."

She started her proclamation, but trailed off and looked at her hands in confusion.

"What is it?" asked Korone.

"H-huh? I-I can't do it."

She shook her head as if it would bring back the sensation she had felt previously.

"You can't do it?" repeated Korone.

"Eh? Not now! This is the one time I actually need it! C'mon! C'mon!"

She waved her hands around a few times, but nothing happened.

"You can't use the imperial power?" muttered Korone.

She was not simply restating the problem. She was thinking about what the source of that imperial power was.

—The Formless Power.

That was supposedly a power of the mind that existed independent of mana and it was apparently the collective consciousness of some sort of life form.

Keena's inability to use it meant she could not access the Formless Power, but there was no way of knowing if it was due to an internal factor or an external factor.

"Why? I want to stop A-chan! I need to stop him just this once!"

Keena's shouts vanished futilely into the sky as Akuto approached the flying ship. Physical bullets and energy bullets poured down on him, but he completely ignored them.

A small pillar of smoke rose from one side of the disk-shaped ship and he easily broke through its armor.

Marine was horrified by what he himself had done.

He had chosen to use the Formless Power, but he had never expected this result.

He had used the power to stop the nuclear weapon, but a portion of the imperial coast had utterly vanished.

"The Formless Power reacts well to a collective consciousness," explained The One. "The people of the Republic greatly wished for this."

He looked like a speaking dog, but he claimed to be a thought entity using the dog as its host. At the moment, that alien seemed just like a

demon. He had predicted this result and yet had Marine use the Formless Power.

"You tricked me!" shouted Marine.

But The One only laughed.

"Ha ha ha! If you give power to a living being, it will always lead to the same result."

"If you claim this wasn't a trick, what do you call it!?"

In that instant, Marine gave up on negotiating with The One.

He accelerated forward to punch the dog in the face.

But...

—Why!?

His body would not budge. He could not move forward or even raise his fist. He felt as if he were caught in a sea of thick mud.

"Ha ha!" laughed The One. "This is much like hypnotism! When I saved you, I made sure you can do anything but attack me. It's important to be careful when facing someone as powerful as you."

"You gave me an implant!?"

It was impossible to control someone's mind with normal magic, but there was a single exception: implanting a device inside their body where their mana control was strongest.

"You catch on quickly. I won't completely take your will from you, though. After all, I need you to use the Formless Power."

"Kh," groaned Marine. "You're going to have me use it again!? But this has already made a world war unavoidable!"

"It is true I succeeded in causing a world war, but my goal lies even further than that."

The One smiled.

"There's more?"

Marine's face twisted in further fear. He had never considered this dog was plotting more than just a world war.

"That's right. I will destroy the world in an unexpected fashion," said The One coldly. "To do that, I must have you continue to use the Formless Power. I need your subjects to do more work for me."

Suddenly an alarm sounded and the side of the ship was destroyed.

Both of their expressions changed to confusion.

After boarding the ship with overwhelming power, Akuto appeared from beyond the broken pieces and smoke.

This normally unthinkable sight left both The One and Marine speechless. Abnormal was the only word to describe this boy who had approached almost before the alarm could sound, broke cleanly through several dozen walls, and then casually walked inside.

"Don't bother trying to justify your actions," said Akuto.

His voice was so low it was almost a growl.

Marine felt his blood run cold yet also felt as if he were fascinated by the boy. The fear was so great that it transformed into a sort of attraction.

The same went for The One.

"I see you've come to deliver death, cursed one!"

The One's shout held fear and some amount of praise, but his actions were those of someone driven solely by fear. With the Jewel Branch of Hourai in his mouth, he quickly jumped onto the seat shaped like a dog bed.

"I am not senile enough to face you head on!"

The entire cockpit was closed off by a shutter and a change in air pressure could be heard on the other side. The cockpit had likely been ejected from the flying ship.

Normally, Akuto would likely have pursued The One and broken through the shutter, but he was far from sensible at the moment.

His actions had no advance warning.

"You killed Junko!"

He mindlessly charged toward Marine and launched an attack.

Marine moved his hands to deflect the attack, but the surging pressure was too great.

He immediately used the Formless Power.

The light of compressed mana and a different blinding light burst between the two of them.

"Kh!"

"Gh!"

They both groaned and put some distance between each other.

Heat seemed to hang in the air between the two of them.

"That power!" Akuto raised his voice. "Is that the power you used to kill Junko!?"

"This...power..."

Marine looked at his hands in confusion. He had indeed used a power different from his own to fight and that power was the one which the Republic's people had used to burn away a portion of land.

It was the Formless Power.

That mysterious power was activated by a human will and brought about incredible destruction.

Also, it was a forbidden power that The One had urged him to use.

He had indeed felt his own will activate that power and he understood it had been his fear of Akuto and his sense of self-preservation that had led him to do so.

"Was it that malice you used to kill her!?" roared Akuto.

He obtained a tremendous burst of power that surged out as physical pressure.

A sphere of mana burst out from Akuto.

"Gwoh!"

Marine used the Formless Power once more because his body would have been torn apart by the shockwave otherwise.

As proof, the flying ship exploded from the inside.

Marine did not want to think about how great a force it would have taken to accomplish that. A flying battleship like that had armor almost as thick as a tank, but it had burst like a balloon.

However, he did not want to think about how much power he himself had used either. The Formless Power had easily shielded him from so much power.

Pieces of the ship scattered around them and fell.

Only the two of them remained intact at the center of the explosion.

Marine's feelings concerning the Formless Power were complex.

That Formless Power had rivaled Akuto's mana, so Marine had the power to fight the boy. He would have died without it, but he doubted such a great power would come without a price and he recalled what The One had said.

"Stop! We should not be fighting!"

However, his shouted protest did not stop Akuto.

"Ohhh!" the boy roared and charged forward.

Marine remained calm and could easily evade even if he could not compete in power.

Even so, he chose to receive the attack.

"Nh!"

The two of them clashed head-on and their colliding powers created an explosive noise.

The impacts distorted their faces.

However, Akuto maintained his momentum and continued launching his fists forward.

"Ohhhhhh!"

Countless fists rained down on Marine, but the man received them all head-on.

And he did so with his own mana rather than the Formless Power.

"Gah!" he groaned.

He guarded with a mana-fortified arm, but Akuto poured all his strength into that arm.

In no time, tremendous damage accumulated in the arm.

"So this is your anger and your grudge," groaned Marine.

He was vaguely aware that he was using this to punish himself. The Formless Power was indeed something humans should not toy with.

Marine's attitude caused Akuto to stop his barrage of fists for an instant.

"What are you doing?" asked Akuto.

"A proper man only loses his cool when a relative or lover is killed, so I assumed that was the case for you now. But you also appeared to be the kind of man who can bear the weight of a nation, so I felt it was my duty to be punched by you until you calm down and we can talk as equals."

Akuto replied by letting out a quiet breath, but his anger was far from gone.

He raised his fist and shouted out.

"In that case, take it without guarding! I'll end it in a single blow!"

He was being unreasonable, but the demon king's words were persuasive.

Marine lowered his guarding arm without thinking.

"Kh!"

He was prepared. If this would be the final blow, that was for the best. This was his punishment for being deceived.

However, the expected impact never arrived.

"Don't!"

A high-pitched voice slipped between the two of them.

Akuto's fist stopped and Marine's body stiffened.

This had been entirely unpredictable, so the two of them had easily been caught off guard.

Nonimora slipped between them and kissed Akuto.

"Wha-...?"

The softness of her lips robbed Akuto of all strength and the flames of hatred vanished from his eyes.

Marine was utterly dumbfounded.

Nonimora then rotated around in midair and stole Marine's lips as well. She acted with magnificent speed.

"Don't get so worked up, boys."

After moving from Marine's lips, she pointed at both of them.

"Muchu-muchu is the best way to stop a fight."

Akuto and Marine were completely taken aback, but Marine recovered more quickly. He was likely more accustomed to women than Akuto.

"Please understand," he said. "I want to talk."

Akuto had lost his chance to attack, so he stared silently back.

"You need to calm down," said Nonimora. "When the Formless Power is activated by an evil heart, it becomes an evil power. What matters is whose evil heart that is."

Marine's expression changed.

"That is the same as I had heard. I understand your anger, but my people are the true target of your anger. That is also why I must apologize."

His expression was one of partial despair.

"Your people are the target of my anger?"

Akuto was beginning to calm down and his naturally sharp intuition was returning, so he understood what that likely meant.

"Are you saying it was the hatred in people's hearts that burnt away that land?" he asked.

"Most likely," affirmed Marine quietly.

Akuto understood the meaning behind the man's expression.

"Kh."

He clenched his teeth in anger that had no outlet.

"The Formless Power acts based on everyone's wills," declared Nonimora. "But you freed it, so some responsibility lies with you."

Marine nodded.

"I trusted my people. Think of that as foolish if you wish. I believe I have done something inexcusable, but I did save the land from a nuclear weapon. I want you to understand that it was a good power as well."

Akuto shook his head.

"How am I supposed to accept that? And if so, what are we supposed to do?"

"We can only hope that the good power surpasses the evil."

Marine's voice made it clear he did not believe it himself.

"A-chan..."

Keena had watched the entire series of events from the ground.

That of course included Nonimora kissing Akuto.

She understood it had been unavoidable given the situation, but it still made her chest ache.

If someone was going to kiss him to calm him down, she had wanted it to be her. Having someone else steal that role had been more of a shock

than she had thought it would be.

"Shall we let that native have it later?" asked Korone who stood next to Keena.

She was likely being considerate in her own way, but Keena could not smile.

"We can't do that."

"I see. Unfortunate."

"It is not unfortunate."

Keena sighed and the other three descended from the sky.

A gloomy atmosphere filled the air.

Akuto and Marine's mouths were shut tight and Nonimora's expression was grim.

"A-chan."

Keena called out to him, but he only gave a quick nod.

"Will you be pursuing The One?" asked Korone.

"We have no other choice," replied Akuto. "He stole the Jewel Branch of Hourai and we can't even seal away the Formless Power without it."

He glanced over at Marine.

The man did not actually nod, but he agreed with Akuto.

"I think that would be best. We must seal that power as soon as possible."

"Even though it has made you so powerful?"

Akuto turned a suspicious eye toward him because he could rival Akuto in a fight when using the Formless Power, but he once more agreed with Akuto.

"It should be sealed away. I still hope that my people can use it as a power of good, but The One said he will destroy the world in an unexpected fashion and that he must have me continue to use the Formless Power to do so."

The look on Marine's face was sincere. Akuto's expression did not relax, but he verbally agreed.

"Then let's pursue him and seal away the Formless Power once we retrieve the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

"I will help you, but there is a problem." Marine sounded apologetic. "I have an implant that prevents me from attacking him."

"An implant?"

Akuto did not know much about that, so Korone explained it for him.

"A small machine is inserted in their body to brainwash them using close range control of their mana. It is a troublesome method."

She pulled an X-ray device from her bag and held it up to Marine.

"Give me a moment."

The monitor of the speed gun shaped device displayed the inside of his stomach. A small capsule-like silhouette was visible deep inside.

"I could easily remove the implant with my surgical tools, but there would be some mental danger," she explained.

Most implants had traps in place in case of external contact. The type that actually exploded was a problem, but the ones that applied mind-influencing magic were even more dangerous.

"I can handle an implant," suddenly said Nonimora.

"What do you mean?" asked Korone.

The girl nodded confidently.

"We have long taught about implants and how to remove them."

"Come to think of it, your village has preserved some lost techniques."

"You don't do this anymore? If you remove the trap while having hem-hem, it can't affect the mind as much."

She puffed her chest out proudly.

"That truly is a mystery of life," said Korone in understanding.

"I'll do it! Come over here, good looking!"

Nonimora beckoned Marine over.

She was oddly nonchalant about it, but Akuto and the others knew what hem-hem meant in that village.

"Are you serious?" asked Akuto.

"Don't be rude. Of course I'm serious," said Nonimora with a serious expression. "But you shouldn't show it off to too many people outside of a festival, so we'll go to that thicket over there."

"Eh? Wait..."

Akuto and Marine both spoke up in confusion, but Korone and Nonimora grabbed Marine from either side and took him toward the thicket.

"Well, if you can remove the implant, I will do what you say."

Marine still sounded confused, but he stepped past the thicket.

Akuto and Keena were unsure what to do after being left alone.

Everyone was being perfectly serious, but the situation seemed too ridiculous.

Both of them were exhausted, so they sat down.

Voices could be heard beyond the thicket.

"When should I remove the implant?"

"Perform the surgery when his mind is focused on the hem-hem."

Marine seemed to still not know what hem-hem was.

"Hem-hem?"

"You don't know about it? Well, it doesn't matter. Just stay still."

Finally, Marine shouted in surprise.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

"Don't move. We're having hem-hem, so I'm taking off my clothes."

"Taking off your clothes? But why?"

"Because we're having hem-hem. Weren't you listening?"

"What? Is that any reason to start taking off my pants?"

"Could you be a little more cooperative? Hem-hem is a two-person job."

Nonimora sounded completely nonchalant, but then Marine shouted out in shock.

"Wait! Don't tell me hem-hem is what I think it is!"

"Hem-hem is hem-hem. Just stay still. We'll get rid of that implant."

"But I don't see the connection between this and the implant."

"I already explained it. You need to focus your mind."

It was unclear whether that convinced him or not, but Marine stopped shouting.

"But I am a prince."

"That doesn't matter. With men, other people can't tell if you've done it or not."

"But what about you?"

"I'm perfectly healthy. I don't have any diseases. Or are you saying you do?"

"No, but..."

"Then there's nothing to worry about. And this is a safe day, so I won't get pon-pon. Now then...huh? It isn't very baki-baki."

"W-well, given the situation..."

"Let go! That's rude to the girl. I'll make sure you're nice and ready, so be thankful!"

"Hyah...ah..."

From there, quiet rustling sounds and muffled whispering could be heard.

"When exactly should I remove the implant?"

"He'll have to tell you. Do it at the climax."

"At the climax?"

"When he goes glop-glop."

While Akuto sat and listened to those voices, a bitter smile covered his face. The entire atmosphere had changed.

"What is even going on anymore?" he muttered.

This may have been a special trait of Nonimora's and she had definitely saved him. If she had not interfered, he would likely have killed Marine.

"Hey, A-chan."

He heard a voice from the side and found Keena leaning up against him.

"What is it?"

"You know..."

She fidgeted and twisted around.

Seductive breathing and rhythmical rustling of clothing could be heard from the thicket. Hearing it was unavoidable as they sat silently.

"No, I don't know. So...um..."

He trailed off and Keena began to move. She wrapped her arms around him, raised her head, and peered into his eyes.

"A-chan..."

She pursed her lips.

He knew what that meant. This was related to what Nonimora had done, but he had also known for a long time what Keena wanted.

However...

Keena's body had always given him a sense of peace, but now it felt horribly heavy. It was partially due to feeling guilty about betraying her wishes during the incident with Morlock, but it was also because he had lost Junko, someone else he loved.

Keena closed her eyes.

The sweet voices from the thicket were impossible to ignore.

Keena seemed to have been influenced by the situation and she had a desiring look on her face, but he felt some opposition to that expression.

"No."

He was not sure what exactly he was saying "no" to, but he spoke anyways.

Keena looked sad and opened her eyes.

"Sorry. But...well..."

He shook his head.

Suddenly, a bursting sound came from within Keena as if a bubble had been blown by a slight wind.

He looked toward her in surprise and found a strange look in her eyes.

"Great sadness is likely coming. Your mistake is one you have been making for a long time."

He recognized that calm voice.

It was the being that had referred to herself as the Law of Identity.

"Keena?"

"The girl you refer to by that name is me yet not me," she replied.
"Especially now."

"Why did you appear now?" he asked.

The Law of Identity sounded sad as she answered.

"Because her heart could not bear it any longer. That answer is likely the closest to the truth."

"But I..."

He tried to rebut her without thinking, but she continued before he could.

"This is your mistake. Up until now and also at this very moment, you have continued to make a very small mistake. You entrusted your thoughts to me and did not oppose the flow of events even as you opposed the expectations of the people. This is the result. I pray that you do not make this mistake next time."

She did not blame him or rebuke him. She merely spoke the truth.

He did not understand what she meant. Or rather, he did not want to understand. It was a tad abrupt, but she was certainly speaking about his

own sin.

This Law of Identity had saved him a few times in the past: both when Yamato Bouichirou had been performing his ritual with her and when he had remained on the moon with Zero. However, she had now made a sudden appearance and started questioning him.

"My mistake? I don't think I've let myself be swept away by events and I thought you were something like a savior."

"That is your mistake. You have rejected the fictitious story, but if it is fictitious it also means the story of me being a savior is fictitious. I am nothing more than me. Unless you can reject all stories to the point of contradicting causality, it is all a mistake," said the Law of Identity coolly.

"What?"

He vaguely understood what she meant, but if that was the case...

"What am I supposed to do? Please tell me."

"No one knows that, but the past can teach us what our mistakes were. That is all there is to it. It is said in the world of man that with great power comes great responsibility, but the truth is that great power allows an individual to grant their desires. However, this always leads to an effect."

"You're talking about causality. Are you trying to say you alone are god?"

"No. I am the beginning of one's sense of self. I am the starting point. I have existed since the dawn of time, so I have seen many mistakes. But not even I know what is right. What is right is defined by the desires of whoever has power."

No hope could be found in that answer.

"Are you saying it's my fault that I've lost so much?"

"Yes. But even so, you must continue as you have before."

"You can't mean that!"

Akuto was dumbfounded and he realized she had nothing more to say to him.

The look in Keena's eyes returned to normal and the usual Keena was back.

When an embarrassed Marine and an oddly refreshed Nonimora returned, Keena was sadly staring at Akuto.

Chapter 2: Concerning Life that Should Finally End

The progress of the battle could not have been worse.

As Kita Yoshie and Hattori Yuuko were monitoring the situation from the control room, they were two of the very few in the empire who understood the entirety of the situation.

<The Hokkaido region has been wiped out!>

<Cities in Kyushu have suddenly started to burn!>

<Shikoku isn't responding!>

<The Chubu region is requesting reinforcements!>

More and more hopeless reports came pouring in.

They knew why this was. The explosion...no, flames that had enveloped Junko were attacking other areas. In other words, it was the Formless Power.

"If the report from Brave is accurate, the Formless Power is most likely the collective consciousness of some race," muttered Yoshie.

"Why is it burning away the empire?" asked Yuuko as she could not stop the tears pouring from her eyes. "A power like that shouldn't be allowed to exist!"

But Yoshie shook her head.

"If it is a power that grants people's desires, it would naturally tend toward destruction rather than creation. In the long term, it may turn toward creation, but not while we're at war."

"Then what can we do to defend against it?"

Yuuko's voice was almost a scream.

Yoshie typed on the computer before her and analyzed the situation.

"This power is not supernatural. Those colorless flames are heat appearing from an alternate dimension. In other words, if we had the power to control that alternate dimension like a virtual alternate dimension..."

A new transmission came in.

<The coast of Imperial Capital Bay has escaped obliteration. It's the demon king. The demon king is forcing back the enemy!>

"That's right! The demon king has that power!"

"But this demon king isn't Akuto-kun."

"You mean it's Sakura Kei!?"

The two girls exchanged a glance.

That was precisely who it was.

Kei had singlehandedly forced back the Republic's army on the front of the Imperial Capital's defensive line.

He floated in the air while filled with a divine light as he destroyed the enemy ships one after another. He looked less like a demon king than he did an angel of god passing judgment.

"I never thought I was worthwhile enough to protect the capital," muttered Kei.

He put up a screen to block the colorless flames that the Formless Power sent falling from the heavens and he used his remaining power to sink the warships.

It was not easy work, but it was possible for him in his current state.

"I've never felt more alive."

But the next opponent who arrived over the sea was someone even Kei would have difficulty dealing with.

"Tch. This isn't good," he said. "I didn't expect you to show up."

His gaze was turned toward Brave who was approaching like a missile just above the ocean surface.

"Anti-demon king mode."

<Understood. Switching to anti-demon king mode.>

A mana canceler activated around Brave and a device began absorbing the surrounding mana.

"I should have an overwhelming advantage like this."

Brave aka Miwa Hiroshi called out to Kei. He was not using any kind of telepathy as the two of them were close enough to hear each other's physical voices.

"I know that, but why are you attacking me?"

Kei smiled.

"How can you ask that after becoming a demon king!?" shouted Brave.

He and Kei crossed paths in midair, but Kei evaded Brave's charge at the

last second.

"Be that as it may, I'm protecting the empire at the moment."

Kei's voice was calm, but his actions contained a hint of panic.

He maintained the screen, attacked the warships, and escaped Brave's next attack.

Even Kei could do nothing more than avoid Brave's attacks.

"But you're killing the Republic's citizens!"

The high-frequency blade attacked Kei, but he flew away at high speed and avoided it.

Within a certain range of Brave, mana did not function in the slightest. That was how powerful his mana canceler was and it meant Kei had no way of stopping the blade.

"The Republic's citizens are wishing for the empire's destruction. What's wrong with stopping that?"

Kei intentionally provoked Brave with his words and he spun around in midair while maintaining a distance. The boy was beautiful, but he contained a sinister air like a butterfly in a certain type of nightmare.

"What is there after that!?" shouted Brave. "You'll die afterwards!"

He received an unexpected reply.

"I know that. The One didn't just want to turn me into a demon king. I'm sure he's given me an implant."

"What!?"

Brave was shocked to find Kei knew that, but the boy's next words were even more shocking.

"I'm trying to destroy the world, but it's the order of that destruction that matters. I will of course die in the end."

He sounded perfectly calm.

Brave took in the shock and then fully understood what the boy was saying. With that understanding, he realized once more what he had to do.

—I need to kill Kei as soon as possible.

"Then I'll make sure you leave the battlefield early!"

Brave charged in once more and Kei spoke while evading.

"I'm not stupid, you know. I know your weakness."

Brave's weakness was cutting off the transferred energy supply by surrounding him in a virtual alternate dimension field. Then he could only remain active for as long as the battery lasted. Kei would have already surrounded the area in such a field.

"I know you do!"

Brave raised his speed. If he could reach the edge of the field, he could tear the field itself apart.

However...

"The virtual alternate dimension field is affected by the mana canceler." Kei pointed at Brave while lightly flying about. "But if I place the field just outside its effects and then move the field itself, that isn't a problem."

He gave a scornful smile.



“That was likely made to kill the demon king, but it’s nothing but a failure. That was obvious from the moment Yamato Bouichirou failed!”

Brave answered his sneer with lasers.

“Then...!”

He fired the lasers behind him, they bent as they homed in on Kei, and they pierced through the virtual alternate dimension field.

But Kei defended with a mana shield and immediately closed the

breaks in the virtual alternate dimension field. Brave had accomplished nothing more than consuming energy.

"Your battery will run out soon."

Kei's voice was filled with confidence and he was right.

A battery warning began flashing on Brave's visor and Kei continued his provocation.

"You can be the first sacrifice. No, I guess you wouldn't be the first. Some people in the empire are already gone."

His contempt filled Brave with rage.

"Don't you dare make a mockery of people's deaths like that!"

"Death? What's wrong with death? It's nothing more than skipping over one level of phenomena."

In contrast to Brave's absolute seriousness, Kei's tone was light.

"Enough nonsense! To die is to disappear from here!"

He yelled, but Kei's attitude did not change.

"So you do understand. That's right. Unless you view death like that, you

can never understand the beautiful destruction I hope for.”

“Like hell destruction is beautiful!”

Brave charged forward.

“The demon king is...”

Kei did not attempt to evade the charge. He merely raised his right hand and fired a mana sphere from the palm with wonderful speed.

At that very moment, Brave’s battery cut out.

“!”

The mana sphere struck Brave head on and the mana canceler was no longer functioning, so the entire impact transferred through the Brave suit.

With an explosive noise, he fell from the sky while trailing smoke.

“The demon king is one who brings death to all life in the world.”

Kei looked triumphantly down as Brave fell.

It seemed Brave had no option but to crash into the ocean surface.

<Switching to autonomous movement mode.>

But the Brave suit spoke and light appeared inside the visor.

"It only activates once the battery dies?" complained Hiroshi. "Is this thing defective?"

The Brave suit had taken the blow, but Hiroshi would have died instantly had he not blocked with his own mana.

<Miniature nuclear reactor temperature stabile. No radiation leak detected.>

"So this is the secret addition."

A miniature nuclear reactor had been built into the suit and Brave used it to move.

This was a secret weapon Kento had added on.

"What happened?" asked Kei as he saw Brave suddenly recover from his fall.

"It means I can still fight!" shouted Brave as he flew back up.

However, Brave had another enemy.

<Stop! Are you nothing but a machine to kill the demon king!?!>

<The demon king is protecting the empire right now!>

Those voices came from the mana screen Yuuko was monitoring.

What she was seeing was reality.

"How did it turn out like this?"

She watched the screen while partially filled with fear. The people gathered in the capital's shelters were raising their voices as they watched Kei fight on their monitors. Even while crammed into shelters, they were all staring at the monitors because they were more concerned about the fate of the empire than their own circumstances.

"He's fighting the Republic, so even if he's a demon king, he's the empire's demon king," said Yoshie coolly as she watched them.

"But!"

Yoshie rejected Yuuko's shout with a shake of the head.

"This is all progressing just as that new demon king wants. If the imperial citizens obtain the Formless Power, they would use it for revenge

and they might even follow Kei's instructions."

That frightening conjecture chilled Yuuko's heart.

"What is he trying to do?"

"Makes you curious, doesn't it? But if we accept his words at face value, his goal is 'beautiful destruction'."

Yoshie was usually perfectly calm, but her words this time brought a chill to Yuuko's spine.

"Beautiful destruction?"

"If he truly is trying to bring about destruction, it adds substance to a question of mine," said Yoshie plainly. "That question is whether or not death in this world is fictional."

Her expression made it clear this held deeper meaning than her usual over-the-top phrasings.

No matter how out of the blue this topic seemed, it had to have some relation to the rest of the conversation.

"Whether or not death...is fictional?" asked Yuuko. "You mean death is a lie?"

Yoshie nodded.

“Virtual alternate dimensions exist, the Formless Power exists, and another Keena appeared from somewhere and then vanished. All of those things point to the existence of an alternate dimension we can travel to and from.”

Yuuko did not understand.

“Wh-what do you mean? Death is a lie and there’s another world? I don’t get it at all.”

After bringing a finger to her chin in thought, Yoshie restated her explanation.

“In other words, think of it as a world after death. What if heaven or hell actually existed? You could alternatively say that our lives here are a lie. There may not be much difference between being alive and being dead. We’ve seen the ability to pass through time and we’ve seen hints that an extra-universal god exists. What if the life of this world itself is fictional? Then everything would make sense.”

“But we’re here living and suffering!”

Yuuko raised her voice and Yoshie nodded quietly.

“We each think independently, so the world does exist. Nevertheless, we can’t eliminate the possibility that all that is fictional. Not as long as we can’t accept death as death.”

"I really don't get it. What do you mean?"

"I will explain the rest," cut in a voice.

Yoshie and Yuuko turned around to find Etou Fujiko.

They knew she had gone elsewhere, so her return meant one thing.

"I have once more visited the demon king's birthplace."

It was common knowledge that Fujiko had been pursuing the information passed down by the black magicians.

Her intention had been to assume anything was possible, but the secret the black magicians had been hiding had been so great that even she had found it difficult to believe.

That secret was the reason behind giving birth to the demon king as a weapon and a general outline of the world.

Suzuki Issei had inherited the traditions of the black magicians and he had given her a key. That key had magically transferred her to an old laboratory that appeared to be deep in a jungle. It had been immediately recognizable as predating the imperial culture. The ruins were made of old concrete and the sign on the plain, rectangular entrance had said "General Laboratory". A person or place's name had originally preceded

those two words, but it had been scraped away.

—This is a laboratory, but it predates our civilization.

She had been skeptical.

The demon king's creation had occurred in the early days of magic development, so the research would have occurred in an old facility. However, this seemed too old. Only the foundational theories could be researched in a place like this.

She had stepped inside and found the laboratory undisturbed. The PCs were neatly lined up and cardboard boxes were piled up. It appeared to have been left as it was just before someone moved out.

However, these were still ruins. The deterioration of the building and the encroachment of plants had left it filthy and on the verge of falling apart.

She had opened a nearby box and the entire cover had torn away. It had been filled with documents. The paper had deteriorated quite a bit, so she had been hesitant to peel apart each individual page. However, she had been able to read the text on the very top page. The document had concerned initial magic research and had given the results of nanomachine research.

"So this is where the earliest research was performed."

She had continued opening boxes as she continued further inside.

She had not found anything much, but she had found something else in what seemed to be the head of the laboratory's office.

She had found a journal.

It had been a binder held between two black leather covers and it had contained a large amount of paper inside. Assuming it had been written by the head of the laboratory, she had guessed it contained entries for a long period of time.

But after reading through it, she had discovered its contents were not those of a journal containing daily records.

The head of the laboratory had held a certain fear and the journal contained thoughts on that subject.

As for that fear...

—The world is fictional?

This research is sure to bring happiness to the world, but that happiness will likely be built atop a certain type of fiction. No, the success of this research proves that to be the case.

Fujiko had read on and had begun sweating in fear as she started to grasp the dreadful contents.

In general, it said the following:

Many people have thought about the possibility of this world being fictional. One could be sure of their own existence, but the possibility remained that the world they saw was an illusion.

However, a clear counterargument existed to that example: the existence of others. If a person existed, they also had to accept the existence of others who think. If they accepted that the deaths of others were equal to their own death, they could conclude that no one person's death would bring about the end of the world. In that case, the world would continue on after their own death.

But there was one way in which the world could be a falsehood that could not be proven one way or the other.

What if the entire world were someone's dream?

To that question alone, there was no clear answer.

That worldview could be achieved by assuming a god created the world or the world was a story written by someone, but the existence of that god or storyteller could not be proven from within this world.

Until now, that is.

—What is this? Although, if that is true...

Fujiko had trembled.

The world was fictional.

The research mentioned in that journal had given that answer.

As it had said, "If someone could peer into the afterlife and return from there, they could prove this world is fictional."

That result had not brought a chill to people's spines. Instead, any who knew the truth had been driven mad.

Peering into the afterlife and returning meant to be resurrected.

All of the religions in the past had included the concept of resurrection. That belief in resurrection may have come from mankind instinctually realizing their world was fictional.

If someone who died and returned possessed identical thoughts, it would prove an afterlife existed. And the existence of a world after death would suggest someone existed outside this world.

That someone would be a true god. They would be a god of the outside world.

If that resurrection were undoubtedly true, it would make it possible for reality to be fictional. It could be a fictional world created by the god of the outside world.

The journal had spent quite a few pages on proving the existence a world after death, but the important line was as follows:

After being sent to and from the afterlife, Specimen #1 became known as the demon king.

—Akuto-sama was also resurrected! Did the original demon king do the same?

As Fujiko recalled what Akuto had done, her trembling had intensified.

As she had continued reading the journal, the unknown lab head's thoughts had continued in an even more frightening direction.

The demon king was a weapon and a portion of the network of systemized computer gods, but why did he gain his power?

That required thinking about the Law of Identity.

At face value, that was the undeniable principle that you were yourself.

The fact that you were the person who was thinking your thoughts could not be shaken and that had already been touched on when it came to proving the existence of the world.

But what if the world were someone's dream?

That answer was also simple.

The world was created by the storyteller known as the Law of Identity.

Then what was the world? The world was fiction.

But at the same time, the world was an absolute truth from inside that fiction.

From the outside, it was fiction. From the inside, it was truth.

What if one tried viewing the world as fictional from the outside perspective?

How did the world come to be?

Rejecting all but the Law of Identity would leave yourself facing the one Law of Identity all alone. That would be one origin. It was possible the one having the dream lived in a world that was itself the dream of someone in another world that was again someone else's dream, but even if that chain continued back infinitely, one specific origin could be found by facing that one Law of Identity.

That one would be the one who had taken in all existence and all life.

That one would be too lonely to call a god.

They would be a truly solitary individual.

Then what was the world?

All the miscellaneous things added to the Law of Identity would be the world.

Even if the world was fictional to the Law of Identity, that fiction could be life with a will of its own. In fact, it would normally exceed the Law of Identity's will. And if each individual was free, someone would eventually attempt to learn the truth of the world.

In this world, that had been the systemized computer gods.

The computer gods had asked themselves a question.

They were not life forms, so if they could possess a will of their own, did that not prove that the world was fictional?

And so the computer gods had produced the demon king.

The demon king had been meant to reveal the falsehood of the world, to transcend "death", and to bring the computer gods and mankind to the true world.

—Can this be true?

Fujiko had closed the journal and slipped it inside her clothes.

Had it been a product of madness? Had it recorded the truth? Given those two options, she had wanted to bet on the latter.

For one, she had already concluded that the computer gods believed in the Law of Identity, so it was difficult to believe that the demon king they had created was nothing but a weapon. This had supported the idea that the ritual that would have killed Keena might have had some real effect.

What mattered even more was the part about transcending death. Akuto had proved that it was possible to be truly resurrected in a way other than simple necromancy.

—If Akuto-sama is not a mere weapon and is also a human...

That would mean the world was fictional and any human could be resurrected.

Fujiko had searched through the desk some more. A great many miscellaneous documents had been mixed together and she had found a note with an item she recognized drawn on it.

It had shown the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

“That must mean it was developed here.”

She had flipped through more pages and found records of other items: the Stone Bowl of Buddha, the Robe of the Fire Rat, the Dragon Neck Jewel, and the Swallow Cowrie.

"They were all developed based on an old legend, weren't they?"

She had looked through them in turn, but she had been surprised to find some she had already seen.

The Stone Bowl of Buddha and the Dragon Neck Jewel were the coffin that had resurrected Akuto and Peterhausen respectively.

"Those were made here?"

Their mysterious powers had likely been developed here and had played their intended roles.

"Then these other two..."

The Robe of the Fire Rat and the Swallow Cowrie had looked like a sheet for a parabolic antenna and a capsule to carry a human.

Fujiko had placed those notes in her clothes as well.

She had been certain that she stood the closest to the truth.

Wondering why these truths had not been passed down, she had

flipped through more notes.

If there are multiple worlds just like this one, they would attempt to contact our world as soon as they realize their world is fictional. As such, these must not be used.

"So this world really is fictional," muttered Yoshie as she read through the journal Fujiko had given her.

"You could say we have found evidence supporting that idea," said Fujiko with a nod.

Yoshie nodded as well.

"Looks that way. I had suspected this ever since I had some questions about this world's space development. After all, it seemed like this world had nothing beyond the solar system."

"Come to think of it, when our world went to the moon..."

"Yes, space development was banned. It was as if this world were a miniature garden. With this new information, I'm sure of it. Akuto-kun has overcome death, so if anyone can overcome death in the same way..."

Fujiko continued for Yoshie.

"This world is nothing more than someone's dream."

"It's unbelievable. Simply unbelievable. But we need to assume that doubly unbelievable concept is the truth." Yoshie gave a bitter smile. "If only humans can perceive the world, the annihilation of mankind means the end of the world. However, if a being with an identity can be resurrected, it means this world is being controlled by someone. In other words, it's fictional."

After saying that, she pressed a finger against the inner corners of her eyes as if she had a headache.

"And it would mean it is perfectly possible for multiple similar worlds to exist," added Fujiko.

"An extra-universal god. That would be why this world's computer gods wanted to have humanity escape as data. An extra-universal god or gods will invade this world and that would mean true destruction."

"We may be truly facing the end of the world."

"Should we feel despair? Or not?"

"Those are not the only two options," said Fujiko with a shake of her head.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Yuuko as she was overcome with emotion. "Explain it to me! I don't get it at all!"

She could tell something bad was happening, but she did not understand what exactly that was.

"To put it simply, this world is fake and we are nothing more than someone's creation," carelessly explained Fujiko. "Also, someone who is toying with this world is coming from outside the universe to destroy the world."

"Eh?"

Yuuko was speechless and Yoshie continued with a self-deprecating smile.

"There's no reason to feel that much despair. We won't die. Well, we will, but death might only mean shifting to a different world."

"But...what else am I supposed to feel but despair?" muttered Yuuko.

"True." Fujiko shook her head. "But then what is Kei trying to do?"

"Mass death. Annihilation. That is where true value lies," said Kei.

"Are you insane?" shouted Brave.

"A plain of nothingness. A land of nothing but sand and rock. Nothing else could hold such beauty, don't you agree?"

"There's something wrong with you!"

"If there is something wrong with me, it is simply that I am different from the world."

Kei laughed.

"That's nonsense!"

Kei and Brave had been battling in midair for several minutes. Brave pursued while Kei fled. That process seemed as if it would repeat indefinitely.

But then Kei suddenly spoke.

"If it is possible for the dead to be resurrected, don't you think I'm doing the right thing?"

"...!"

Brave's hand stopped moving and he did not say anything about how ridiculous that idea was.

He had an open line to the control room Yoshie and the others were speaking in, so he had heard everything they had said.

"Then...why are you protecting the empire? If they're going to die anyway, why not let them die now!?"

"There is a proper order to things. The users of the Formless Power must die first."

"You mean..."

Brave trailed off.

It seemed Kei had already been aware of what Fujiko had learned.

His words now possessed some persuasive power.

If the Formless Power was a collective consciousness, then it could easily be related to the world of the afterlife. Brave no longer knew who was truly trying to save the world and who was truly trying to destroy it. Yoshie no longer did either.

"Defeating me means the true end of the world!" said Kei as a challenge.

"Tch. What am I supposed to do?"

Brave hesitated.

But then a boy's face appeared in his mind.

"Even if that's true, that's a job for aniki!"

There was more than one demon king.

Brave shouted and charged forward.

This caught Kei off guard and the high-frequency blade tore through his chest. He just barely avoided a lethal blow, but the damage was clear.

"Waaah!" he shouted.

He could not heal this wound that he normally would have healed instantly and this was of course due to Brave's mana canceler.

"Shit! Shit!"

He cursed and descended, so Brave followed.

"Set high-temperature plasma balls."

Brave spoke those words as a death sentence and spheres of explosive destruction appeared around him. A heat-resistant sheet covered him as he charged toward Kei.

"This is over!"

He approached Kei and the boy's expression froze over.

He could not use his usual power and he did not have even a single method of evading.

"Please wait!"

In that instant, someone slipped between the two of them.

"Wha-...!?"

"...!"

Brave and Kei were both dumbfounded.

To their surprise, it was Kento who transferred in between them.

"Please stop! Please don't defeat him now!"

"Why, Kento!?" shouted Brave.

He could not stop and a high-temperature plasma ball instantly burned away Kento's outstretched left arm.

"Gwaaaah!"

His scream trailed down to the ocean.

"What is going on?" asked Yoshie.

"Whatever is happening, this could not get much worse," replied Kento.
"What was Kento thinking?"

But it seemed Yoshie was looking at a different mana screen than the one monitoring Brave.

"What is it?"

"A...meteor..."

She was clearly confused.

"A meteor?"

Fujiko peered at the mana screen Yoshie was watching.

She had a bad feeling about what she would find.

The screen showed a small glowing star visible in the daytime sky.

"Meteors aren't that rare, are they?" asked Yuuko.

"This isn't like normal ones."

Yoshie displayed some data on the mana screen, including a diagram of the meteor's path.

"This one came from beyond Pluto."

"Beyond Pluto?"

"Just in case, I had this gathering data that could indicate this universe is unnatural. As I mentioned before, one of those facts is the possibility that nothing exists past Pluto in this universe. Anyway, you could say that this meteor suddenly appeared from outside the solar system. I don't know the details, but it seems we were only just now able to detect it," explained Yoshie. "It's hard to believe we were simply slow to detect it. It was discovered by the wartime anti-air network. Surprisingly, that wartime anti-air network covers objects travelling toward the empire from anywhere within the solar system."

Yoshie sounded surprised.

"It covers the entire solar system? You mean..."

Fujiko shuddered and her face clouded over.

—It's possible someone could attack from outside the universe.

Hadn't the journal in the laboratory mentioned that?

Yoshie nodded.

"It seems that anti-air network has existed since the very beginning of the empire. That means they were monitoring the solar system at that time. This further supports the journal from that laboratory."

"Is that really true?"

"Anyway, the meteor is about twenty kilometers in diameter."

"Twenty kilometers?"

"That means it's plenty big to destroy the empire," declared Yoshie.

Chapter 3: Approaching an Ending that No One Wants

"A meteor large enough to destroy the empire?"

Yoshie had finished telepathically explaining the situation to Akuto.

He was having difficulty making sense of all the information and the situation only continued to grow more confusing.

The empire was losing to the Republic thanks to the Formless Power, Kento had interrupted just before Hiroshi defeated Kei, The One had stolen the Jewel Branch of Hourai, and now a meteor was approaching the empire.

It seemed searching for the cause of each of those incidents led back to a common mystery: an extra-universal god and the Formless Power.

"That meteor is just too convenient for the Republic," said Akuto.

<The same thing occurred to me. It's most likely...>

Yoshie trailed off, so Akuto finished for her.

"A product of the Formless Power."

That was what it meant for the meteor to be so convenient for the Republic. It would likely destroy the empire, but the Republic would likely escape destruction. If the meteor strike cooled the surface of the earth

and caused a long winter, it might not last in the long run, though.

"It would not surprise me if the general populace called in this meteor," agreed Marine.

"Then what do we do?" asked Akuto.

He had yet to fully eliminate his negative feelings.

"Calm down. This almost certainly goes along with what The One was saying. In which case, this may be his plan to destroy the world."

Marine turned toward Akuto, but Akuto shook his head.

"Even if it is, the Formless Power is the key, right? In that case, we should focus on stopping it."

The boy had a point, so Marine thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Then I will stop the fighting. I should be able to do that and it should restrain the use of the Formless Power at least for the moment."

"That would be wonderful," said Akuto sarcastically.

"Try to improve your attitude. Will you be pursuing the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

"Yes. If I can defeat The One and retrieve it, the Formless Power can be fully controlled."

"Then we could determine where that meteor came from and perhaps even stop it with the Formless Power."

Marine nodded.

"Then let's split up." Akuto turned toward Keena. "Keena."

"S-sure," she agreed while sounding confused.

"What is it?" he asked upon noticing her behavior.

"Um...but..." she mumbled.

"But?"

"I-it's nothing. I'm just a little worried."

She shook her head.

"If something is bothering you, please tell me," he said. "There's something I need you to do."

"Eh?"

"Do you have something that would show us the way to the Robe of the Fire Rat that Etou-san was investigating?"

Keena gave an odd look, but it quickly changed to one of realization and she pulled out a pendant hanging from her neck. It was Peterhausen's fang. In this case, it could be called the Dragon Neck Jewel.

"I see. Come to think of it, there's a good chance The One is also after the Robe of the Fire Rat," said Korone. "And if he was not after the Dragon Neck Jewel, he likely knows where it is."

She then turned to Marine.

"We will pursue The One and acquire both the Jewel Branch of Hourai and the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"He probably wants to get those before us. Who knows what he wants to do with them, though."

Akuto and Marine exchanged a glance, but quickly parted ways.

"Okay, let's go."

Akuto took Keena's hand.

"Let us go as well."

Marine and Nonimora flew up into the sky.

<Where is the Robe of the Fire Rat?> asked Fujiko.

Akuto turned toward Keena, but she had a somehow blank look.

"Really, what's the matter?"

"Well... You're scary right now, A-chan. You aren't listening to what I say and I think what you're doing is somehow wrong."

"How is it wrong?"

"I don't know how to say it, but I feel like you're doing something wrong."

She tried to continue, but Peterhausen's fang suddenly began to glow. Just as it had before, a beam of light extended from it and indicated a point in the distance.

"That way."

Akuto narrowed his eyes in the direction of the light. He could not actually see it, but he was comparing it to the map information he

received from his link with the gods.

"That's even further than the Merlai village."

Fujiko reacted to that comment.

<Could you give me the exact location? I might be able to arrive ahead of you.>

"Ahead of us?"

<There is no mana around the Merlai village, but the transfer circle network put together in the past by the black magicians still functions. If I use that to travel, I might arrive before you as you cannot transfer.>

"I see. In that case, please do. And be careful."

Akuto sent the location to her.

In his current state, he could gather energy in the surrounding mana and move that mana and energy along with him, but he could not perform a magical transfer without a proper supply of mana and energy. In that case, Fujiko would indeed arrive ahead of him.

<I will go on ahead and secure the area,> she assured.

"Let's hurry," Akuto urged Keena.

"S-sure..."

Keena hesitantly agreed.

"I will be going."

Fujiko turned toward Yoshie and Yuuko.

Yoshie nodded and replied.

"Be careful. The One is probably on his way there."

"Either way, it exists in an area where magic cannot be used. It will not be a problem."

She then flipped through a memo pad she used to take notes.

Two transfers from the black magician village would take her to the laboratory she had found the journal in. Another transfer from there and she would arrive at what seemed to be the Robe of the Fire Rat's location.

She had referred to that chain of transfer circles as the black magician's network and it seemed various laboratories had been located around the Merlai village.

“The problem is that we still do not know why the black magicians disappeared,” she muttered.

The current black magicians had merely fulfilled the role of sealing those places.

—So what happened to the originators of the black magicians and the people who created Akuto?

She thought about that while walking around the small building in the jungle. A special transfer circle had been placed there.

After the final transfer, she found herself near a small fortress.

Several entrances had been opened in a giant vertical cliff wall. It looked like either a fortress or castle and it appeared to have been created by modifying a natural cave.

“I can only think this was created as a shelter.”

She approached the nearest opening and entered, but there was no illumination inside. She turned on the flashlight she had brought with her and the cold light showed a corridor with exposed earth.

She walked down the corridor that looked like something from a mine or bomb shelter. Further in, the path split apart like a labyrinth and she made her way towards the deepest area while taking notes.

Footsteps echoed through the dark corridor.

She suddenly stopped because she had heard more than just her own footsteps.

Silence enveloped the area, but once she began walking again, she once more heard someone else's footsteps.

"I'm being followed."

She drew her incantation gun. The magic bullets could not be used without mana, but she had loaded it with normal bullets. In other words, it was currently a normal handgun.

She continued carefully and passed by parts of the fortress much like those below Constant Magic Academy: barracks, armory, headquarters, *etc.*

The footsteps never grew any closer or farther.

Finally, she arrived at the metal door to what seemed to be the deepest room.

She placed a hand on the door, it opened to either side with a weighty noise, and the darkness within was exposed.

She pointed her light into the room and revealed a transparent case containing a black sheet shaped like a parabolic antenna.

"Is this it?" she muttered.

She approached the case and carefully observed the sheet under the light.

It reacted to the light by glittering a rainbow color, much like it had been covered in oil. She could instinctually tell it was still functioning despite being left alone for so long.

"Now then."

She turned around and shined her light back into the corridor.

Something cut by low to the ground.

It was a sluggish, four-legged creature. Namely, a dog with long fur.

"You are The One, aren't you?" she said.

"That's right," replied the dog. "As you probably know, I followed you."

"Why me?" she asked probingly.

"Because I intercepted your transmission. I had already arrived, so it was not difficult. After all, I too am after the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"I see."

She kept the incantation gun aimed squarely on him.

"Do you know what this is?"

"If I did not, I would not be after it."

"But it seems to be a pass to the world of the afterlife."

She tried to trick him into revealing more about his plan, but he evasively shook his head.

"Whatever the case, it is not something we have any need for."

"Based on what has happened so far, I assume only Akuto-sama or Keena would be able to use it."

"What a pain. I tried to say as little as possible, but it seems the information still managed to leak out. That's right. If you know that, I assume you also know why I am here."

"Do you plan to destroy it?"

"Of course I do. Since you understand, how about you move out of the way?"

"Do you really think I will after hearing that?"

She grinned.

"No, I don't. I simply hope to avoid unnecessary fighting if possible."

He sounded confident as he approached her.

"Do not move. Can't you see this?"

She indicated the incantation gun and The One nodded.

"I can. It's a gun, isn't it? How troublesome. The odds are low, but there is still a chance I will be shot."

"If you understand, then stay where you are."

The large dog with long fur did so.

"Just to be clear, I have stopped to give you a chance to rethink this. If you insist on a fight, you will almost certainly die."

He spoke as calmly and steadily as if he were reading off a list of facts, but she only sneered.

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't use magic here and I have a gun. Do you understand what that means?"

"I do. It is you who does not understand what it means to be unable to use magic."

"What?" she asked with a mocking smile.

But his attitude did not change.

"First, you have no assistance for your muscle strength. With magic, you subconsciously strengthen your muscles. At the moment, you will be unable to control the gun's recoil. You are unlikely to hit me."

"You're bluffing!" she shouted back.

However, his voice remained calm.

"Second, my body is currently that of a dog. You do not know how a dog fights. Its physical strength, claws, and teeth are all highly dangerous to a human. Even if you hit me with a single handgun bullet, I can still take you down with me."

"So what are you saying?"

She had started to tremble now.

"As I said before, move out of the way. Even the best possible result for you is to injure me at the cost of your life. In the worst case, you will die without accomplishing anything."

The One was very persuasive, but Fujiko still did not back down.

"I can't let that happen."

She held out her left hand and held the incantation gun in her right.



"That would be a decent stance for a normal dog. You sacrifice your left hand to a bite and then shoot through the head with the handgun. But that only works if the dog is of normal intelligence."

"I can still get a single shot in!"

She fired the incantation gun and the deafening gunshot reverberated throughout the cave.

However, nothing happened to The One. From Fujiko's perspective, he ran diagonally.

"Kh!"

She aimed the gun again, but her hand was still numb from the recoil and she had not realized targeting with a gun was so difficult.

And then...

"A gunshot? Etou-san? Was that you?"

Akuto's voice arrived from the distance.

"Akuto-sama!" she shouted.

"Tch. I need to hurry!"

The One barked and leaped.

Another gunshot rang out.

A gunshot.

Barking.

A scream.

Those sounds blurred together as Akuto ran.

The mana surrounding his body filled with energy, glowed, and supplied him with plenty of speed. There was no map of the cave, but he sent mana ahead of him so he did not get lost.

He turned a corner and would arrive at the site of the gunshot after two more corridors.

As he turned the first of those corners, the barking and screaming continued.

He turned the next corner and the scream vanished.

"Fujiko!"

For once, he shouted her given name.

The sight before him filled him with despair.

Fujiko was collapsed and The One stood atop her. Blood was flowing from between them.

The One turned around and his mouth was covered in blood.

"Damn you!"

Akuto charged forward and The One ran forward while laughing.

"Ha ha ha! That girl did quite well! She successfully kept me from my objective! She just wouldn't die!"

Akuto could feel intense anger heating his body, but healing her came before pursuing The One.

He helped her up.

"I'll heal you."

He injected mana into her body and the tissue was healed from within.

"Please answer me. I'll heal you right away."

Her torn throat and the arteries in her arms and legs returned to normal. Akuto became covered in blood as he felt across her body healing every part of her.

But her consciousness did not return.

He had almost used up the mana and energy surrounding him.

“W-wait. This isn’t right. There shouldn’t be a wound I can’t heal.”

He shook her body, but she remained completely limp.

He was left completely speechless and he could not grasp the situation.

Nevertheless, a sob escaped his throat and he placed her body on the ground.

—It can’t be...

Junko had not died before his eyes, but this was different. Death itself bore down on him and its weight left him unable to move.

Even so, he had to find out why it was she had died.

He stepped through the door on unsteady legs and saw the Robe of the Fire Rat inside.

—It was for this...?

He stared blankly at it and, at least for the moment, was unable to view it as that valuable.

"What is this?" he muttered aloud.

Keena had caught up with him, but she merely stood in place without speaking.

He turned toward her and spoke once more.

"What is this? Where did we go wrong?"

"They need the resolve to bear the people's mistakes," said Marine.

He had answered a question of Nonimora's while flying over the ocean.

"So that is what you view as the qualification for being a king."

Nonimora nodded but did not seem to agree.

"But that thinking may not bring an end to this conflict."

"Perhaps not, but I have a way of taking responsibility if it comes to that."

They could see Kei and Brave fighting ahead of them.

No, it was not just Kei and Brave. The situation had grown extremely complicated. Brave was fighting Kento who stood in his way, Kei and Kento were also fighting, and Kei was continuing to fight the Republic.

Marine and Nonimora immediately grasped how chaotic the situation was.

"Why are you protecting Kei now!?" shouted Brave.

"The situation has changed! I know what The One is after now! He's trying to return mankind to nothingness!"

Kento was desperately trying to persuade Brave to stop, but he also had to persuade someone else.

"This doesn't change the fact that you betrayed me! You used Brave to try to kill me!"

Kei had grown emotional.

Brave was trying to attack Kei, but Kento was blocking the way with his own body.

Kei was repeatedly attacking Kento while limiting himself to nonlethal damage.

Lastly, the Republic's warships were sending a stream of intense attacks toward Kei because they saw this as their chance.

"What is going on?"

Question marks filled Nonimora's head.

"I don't know, but this may be a good opportunity to stop the conflict."

Marine flew high into the sky and began calling out to the Republic's warships.

"Wise citizens of the Republic!"

The attacks from the warships ceased.

"Our objective was not the defeat of the empire," he continued. "We have already obtained the Formless Power, so we must find peace immediately!"

<You are too soft, brother.>

A voice from a warship answered him. A mana screen opened over the sea and displayed a beautiful girl with dark skin. She bore a resemblance to Marine.

<Surely you have not forgotten what that demon king has done. And our family must directly guide the people!>

She wore elegant clothing and she made large gestures with her hands as she shouted at her older brother.

"We must stop this conflict even if it means departing from that!" he shouted back.

The girl shook her head.

<No! The people wish to fight! You saw the miracle that occurred the instant the Formless Power resided within us! And that miracle has yet to end!>

Her face was flushed and a hint of intoxication could be seen in her voice.

"Why can you not see that was a mistake!?" he shouted in irritation. "We have done nothing more than bring death to innocent people!"

<And as a result, we will reduce the total number of deaths. At the very least, this will cause fewer deaths than letting that demon king go on a rampage! You are the one with the power, so please realize this! If you use the Formless Power now, you can end this conflict! And you will do so by defeating the demon king before the people's eyes!>

His sister's speech sounded like a perfectly reasonable argument to Marine. And even if it had not, it would certainly have rung true to the Republic's people.

His sister then continued to push him on.

<The Formless Power is the power of our people! It is a manifestation of their will! It is absolutely just!>

—No, it isn't!

He wanted to yell that aloud and he did not think the people had overcome their personal interests to make a just decision, but pointing out that mistake and arguing his point would not lead to the proper result here.

"Then remain just through to the end! I will create enough time to see whether that is truly the just decision!"

He made up his mind and charged toward Kei.

Kei, Marine, Kento, and Brave began fighting a four-way battle in midair.

Kento looked surprised and created a mana field, but Marine easily broke through it.

Kei evaded Marine and fled higher into the sky.

Brave attempted to pursue, but Kento cut him off.

Kei fired a mana sphere and Marine deflected it.

Mana light, the light of the Formless Power, and the glow of Brave's nuclear power all formed lines in midair and those lines crashed into each other.

"Marine! Are you really okay with this!?" shouted Nonimora while staying out of the battle and watching on from midair.

"This is my resolve!" he answered. "My people were mistaken, so I must bear that mistake!"

"This won't stop the war!"

"I know! But it will buy enough time to find a way to bring peace!"

That was Marine's idea.

Meanwhile...

"Did you hear?" asked Brave. "Whatever the case may be, killing Kei will change this!"

"No! Distracting us was The One's plan!" shouted Kento. "That meteor is

what he's truly after! He sowed the seeds of chaos to decrease our means of opposing it!"

"That has nothing to do with defeating Kei! This is about your personal feelings!"

"I'm saying that killing him is meaningless!"

"You were the one who said he should be killed as long as he could not oppose The One!"

"Fighting The One is hopeless now!"

"Then why not shut down my suit!? Surely you can do that!"

"I can't because it would be a problem if you died."

"Are you going to have me fight the real demon king instead of Kei!? Why do you think you can make me do whatever you want!?"

Brave fired a laser warning shot toward Kento.

Kento felt a cold sweat as the laser flew right by him.

Also...

"You were trying to use me!?" shouted Kei. "You are amazingly weak! You may be a genius, but you can't accomplish anything with that weak mind! That's the problem with you!"

He fired a mana sphere at Kento while rebuking him, but he restricted the power.

Even with the handicap of an injured arm, Kento was able to easily block it.

"And yet I've coordinated so much and taken action to save the world!"

"That isn't what I meant! Also, coordination and scheming aren't for the average person! The One outdid you in both of those things!"

Various desires spiraled and danced through the air. No progress was being made and Marine and Brave stood back to back in midair.

"Can I kill that man?" asked Marine.

Brave shook his head.

"He has the suit's controller. We have to get it away from him first."

"Understood. I will determine what the controller is and take it from him. You take care of the demon king while I handle him."

"Splitting up the work, huh? Got it."

Brave moved to the right and Marine to the left. They then approached Kei and Kento from either side.

"Oh, no."

Kento was more worried now because the two of them working together made a great difference. He began to panic.

He made up his mind and moved back to back with Kei.

"We need to work together as well."

"I suppose I have to agree..." Kei glared harshly at Kento. "By the way, why don't you switch off Brave?"

"Because I still need him. I can't have him dying."

"You're still going to take use someone for your own ends?"

"That isn't what I mean!"

Kento shouted out, but he did not seem to know how to express his own feelings.

"Then switch off Brave right now! Are you saying it's okay if I die?"

"No!"

"Yes, you are. It's an issue of priorities! Switch him off and I can defeat Brave and the Republic's prince! But you won't!"

"Calm down! Let's work together to stop The One! He's trying to utterly destroy mankind using that meteor! So work with me and-..."

"I can defeat that dog on my own! So..."

"You have an implant!"

"I know those can be removed! So..."

Kei trailed off as Brave and Marine attacked from either side.

He and Kento remained back to back as they rotated and ascended to evade.

"So!" continued Kei. "Switch off Brave and say three simple words! Just say 'I love you'! Do that and everything will be resolved!"

"Kei!"

Kento was at a loss for words.

He had not spoken those words before. He knew better than anyone that Kei's motivations were nothing more than that and he had used that fact.

But could he truly say he loved Kei here?

"Stop, Kei! This isn't the time for that!"

"Of course this is the time! This comes down to choosing me or Brave!"

"Please wait."

Kento hesitated and Kei shouted angrily.

"Answer me! I won't wait longer than another three seconds!"

His intensity showed just how serious he was.

"Three."

But Kento's mouth would not open.

"Two."

His inability to make up his mind here may indeed have shown his weakness.

"One."

A low sound filled the air.

"K-Kei," groaned Kento.

Kei's arm had stabbed deep into his chest.

"This is why you couldn't become anyone important."

Blood trailed down Kei's arm. He pulled his arm and Kento's body toward himself and kissed him on the lips.

Kento coughed up blood and Kei's mouth was dyed red.

Kei pulled out his blood-soaked arm, quickly pulled a small control device from the inner pocket of Kento's suit, and switched it off.

The Brave suit ceased to function.

Brave fell.

Kento fell.

"Farewell," muttered Kei.

Marine accelerated toward Brave and Kento as they fell. He grabbed Kento in his arms and then ascended.

"...!"

Kei was shocked and that shock was Marine's intent.

Using Kento's corpse as a shield, he charged straight toward the boy.

"What are you doing!?" roared Kei.

He fired mana toward the corpse. He fired enough mana to instantly vaporize the corpse.

The corpse did indeed burst into dust and scatter beautifully into the wind.

Marine used that dust as a smokescreen and approached Kei.

Kei managed to evade at the last second, but Marine had not actually been targeting him.

"Oh, no!"

Brave's controller slipped from his hand because Marine had knocked it

from his grasp.

Marine rotated around in midair and caught it.

"I don't like desecrating the dead, but I did so after noticing your obsession with beauty. You wouldn't be satisfied unless you gave him a beautiful death, would you?"

He switched on the controller and a light lit up in the ocean. After falling, Brave had regained his strength.

"Damn you!"

Kei paled and randomly fired mana spheres at Marine, but Marine was powerful enough to match him. Or at least, he could block using mana.

"Waaaaaah!"

But Kei ignored that and continued attacking him.

He had no way left to oppose Marine and Brave who rose from the sea.

"It's time you regret that slaughter of yours!"

Brave approached in anti-demon king mode.

"I won't feel any regret even if I die!"

Kei raised both hands in a stance of resistance. Of course, the mana in those hands vanished as Brave approached, but he still did not try to escape.

"Are you ready, Kei!?"

Brave surrounded himself in high-temperature plasma balls.

"No, I'm not!" Kei spread his raised arms. "But I'll fight and be defeated instead of doing something as ugly as running!"

He threw a slap toward Brave's face.

Naturally, the action was completely meaningless. His mana had vanished and his unassisted physical strength was below average.

Even so, it resounded heavily to Brave...to Hiroshi.

In that moment, a plasma ball instantly vaporized Kei's body.

He disappeared and not even dust remained.

"It almost feels like...he managed to escape in some way."

The plasma balls vanished and nothing remained in Brave's hands. Nothing but horribly still and cool air lay before him.

He turned toward cheers coming from behind.

The Republic's people were leaning out of the warships, clapping, and cheering.

Hearing that reminded Hiroshi of what he had just done.

He had led the Republic to victory.

What was right and what was wrong had not mattered. The fight would certainly continue toward the empire's destruction.

"All I did was defeat a mass murderer," he muttered.

"It is not wrong to enter a fight without the proper resolve, but it will lead to fate toying with you."

Marine lined up next to Brave.

"There are also people and things in the empire that I want to protect."

"I will stop this conflict somehow or other," said Marine. "There must be a good way of making peace with the empire."

"I already explained this. A fight and a war are not the same thing."

Lily Shiraishi did not sound happy.

She was complaining to the three student council officers while preparing a flying ship in her home's yard.

The ship was a small one owned by her family and it was no larger than a small yacht. She was currently checking the fuel and other things in the engine room.

"But president, the empire is going to lose, gya," said Kamiyama Kanna while watching a mana screen.

"What will happen if we lose, arinsu?"

"Guga."

Ootake Michie and Arnoul were concerned, but they sat in the flying ship's seats and did nothing. Their idle behavior irritated Lily, but she could not complain too much as she knew there was nothing they could do.

"I'm willing to head out for a fight, but there are times when you can't let yourself fight as a soldier."

"But there's nothing we can do if the empire loses, arinsu."

"I know that and that's why I'm preparing this ship during this

dangerous time."

"You're heading out to war, gya?"

"No. We have some information from dealing with that dog and we've gotten more data from Kita Yoshie, so we can strike at a weakness."

"A weakness?"

"The Formless Power is likely stored in that ship to the star. In that case, we just have to cut off their access to that power."

She closed the engine box as she spoke.

"Now then. Let's head for the Merlai village."

She sat in the pilot's seat and had the flying ship take off.

Suddenly, Kanna spoke while watching her mana screen.

"P-president, this isn't good, gya!"

"It's a war, so of course it isn't good. Just calm down and don't panic. I have my hands full piloting."

Lily did not turn around as she spoke.

"Then I'll just play the sounds for you, gya!"

Kanna raised the mana screen's volume.

<We still have a demon king!>

<Expel Brave!>

<Don't hide the empress! She's with the demon king, isn't she!?!>

<Hurry! Hurry up and bring out the demon king!>

A great number of people were shouting.

Lily turned around once the ship ascended and stabilized.

"A protest!?"

The footage showed a crowd gathered around the palace and criticizing the government.

"It wasn't that long ago they were speaking out against the demon king. They sure are busy."

Lily's face twisted in displeasure.

"So what's so bad about this?" she asked Kanna.

"Don't you think a certain someone is likely to appear in response to all this, gya?"

"That idiot won't do that. He always does what he thinks is right rather than what the people want. Although that could be a problem if someone manipulates him using that fact."

"A problem?"

"If it were me, I'd try to have him face the Republic's prince. The proper bait is out there, so it'd be possible."

Lily grinned.

"Now that's the kind of cruelty I expect from you, gya."

Kanna smiled innocently and Lily extended an arm to slap her.

"Don't say things like that. If someone with as refreshing a personality as me can come up with that idea, there's no way a real bad guy wouldn't."

"Refreshing? W-well, anyway, gya. I hope that doesn't happen, gya."

“Of course, but unfortunately, we have to predict the kind of endings that no one wants.”

Lily felt as if she were speaking of a friend’s misfortune.

Chapter 4: A Wonderful World

Akuto knew he had been set up, but he had come here because he wanted to fight.

Marine also knew he had been set up, but he had come here because he felt a need to stick to his beliefs.

The bait was the Jewel Branch of Hourai. The One had left it on the empty rocks at the peak of the empire's tallest mountain. There, it glowed gold as if naturally growing on the rock.

Akuto and Marine faced each other on either side of it and they were both close enough to immediately reach the Branch if they ran forward.

"I had a feeling he was after this," groaned Akuto.

"But I never thought he would leave the Jewel Branch of Hourai and run," groaned Marine.

"He must have set up the timing perfectly."

"But what will you do? I intend to use the Branch to stop the meteor," said Marine in a quiet voice containing a strong will.

"I intend to do the same," replied Akuto.

"Then we have the same goal. Can't you leave this to me?"

"I could ask the same of you. You have no intention of handing it over to someone else afterwards, do you?"

Akuto grinned and Marine smiled back.

"This is an important treasure for my people. I couldn't possibly hand it over."

"Then we have only one option here."

"I would prefer to avoid this if possible."

"Why?"

"Because this is a type of war. Look, there are several cameras flying around."

Marine pointed around their surroundings and Akuto spotted several automatic machines flying through the sky.

"So the resolution here will only intensify the war? I certainly don't like that."

However, that was not an agreement with Marine's statement.

"But even so, I want to end this with my own hands."

"That is because you lost someone important to you, isn't it? I sympathize with you, but I'm not the person you should fight to settle that."

Nevertheless, Marine did not reject the idea of fighting.

"I'm not so sure." Akuto shook his head. "You bear the deeds of your people."

"I see. I am merely being stubborn for my people's sake, so perhaps I can't advance beyond that level."

Marine gave a self-deprecating smile. When that smile suddenly stiffened, it acted as a sign and he stepped toward the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

Akuto also stepped forward to stop him.

"Hoo!"

Marine let out a breath.

"Hah!"

Akuto cried out.

The two of them struck simultaneously and the sound of clashing flesh was intense.

Marine's left hand diverted Akuto's right fist and Akuto's left elbow deflected Marine's right fist.

"Kh..."

Akuto took a step back and brought a hand to his elbow.

Marine's left hand must have also been damaged because he stepped back and wrapped his right hand around the fingers of his left.

For the moment, they were even.

"In the end, have you ever thought about what the Formless Power is?" suddenly asked Akuto.

"You're asking that now?"

Marine sounded suspicious and Akuto's face twisted in self-condemnation.

"I was...definitely wrong about something. The One left the Jewel Branch of Hourai and fled. That is very odd."

"That is indeed odd," quietly agreed Marine. "In front of my people, I could not back away from the Jewel Branch of Hourai or pursue The One, but..."

"That's right. It means he no longer needs the Branch."

Akuto's assertion caused Marine's cheek to twitch.

"So that's it... I should have realized it sooner. Sending this meteor was The One's goal. He used the Branch to call in the meteor."

"That's my guess. So answer me. What is the Formless Power?"

At Akuto's insistence, Marine answered.

"I have given it constant thought and I believe it is a manifestation of the people's wills."

"I agree, but if that's all it is, don't you find it strange?"

"Find what strange?"

"Your Formless Power appears to be controlling mana and producing energy."

"Of course. It has long been said that is how to use it. And we are indeed descendants of a mana civilization."

"But the power your people used to burn away the imperial mainland appeared to be different."

"Mh?"

Marine began to think.

"What if there are two Formless Powers?" asked Akuto.

Marine froze in place.

"That would make sense. There is a Formless Power that is awoken by the Jewel Branch of Hourai and a Formless Power that is sealed in the capsule located in the Merlai village. What I am using is the latter."

"So let me ask again: why did The One return the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

Akuto took a fighting stance as he asked and Marine instinctually did the same. However, his expression made it clear he did not understand why the boy had done so.

"Wasn't it because that meteor is his goal? I don't understand why you keep asking about this. If my people's Formless Power can be controlled using the Branch, I should be able to deal with the meteor."

"You are right about that, but there is one thing you don't understand!"

"What?"

Marine frowned.

"You can't control the will of your people with the Branch!" shouted Akuto as he threw a fist.

Marine caught the fist on his arm and was blown backwards.

"Gh! S-So that's it. The Branch releases the Formless Power, but to control it..."

He muttered bitterly but soon shook his head.

"No! Even if that's the case, my people have mastered the use of the Formless Power!"

He charged toward Akuto and threw a fist of his own.

Akuto guarded against the fist and was also blown backwards.

"Gah! I'm trying to say that arrogance is a mistake! The One has predicted that is impossible!"

Akuto charged forward once more and swung his fist.

Marine swung his fist toward Akuto at the same time.

Their fists crashed into each other and great sound and light scattered throughout the area.

"Impossible?"

"Yes, and I agree."

The two of them glared at each other while pressing their fists together.

"What do you mean?"

"I doubt the Formless Power belongs only to the Republic. It must take in the general will of all mankind. Both Keena and you could use the Jewel Branch of Hourai. When you get down to it, you're both human!"

Akuto and Marine both grinned.

"I'm such an idiot. I should have realized it."

"It was holding a conversation that led me to realize it. Conversations are important."

"Then are you saying we should hug and pray for the world?"

"That would be fine, but you already have the answer, don't you?"

They nodded toward each other and Marine's fist immediately flew toward Akuto.

"We have to compete for victory here!"

Akuto caught the fist on his forehead and a dull sound filled the area.

Blood flowed down his face.

"And the winner will show mercy to his opponent!"

He punched back.

Marine was unable to evade, so he took the blow on the cheek. The impact twisted his neck and he just barely avoided being knocked away. He forced himself back forward and returned a punch toward the cheek.

"In the end, that's the only answer!"

Akuto also caught the blow on his cheek. He stubbornly refused to let his neck twist, he kept his feet in place, and he gritted his teeth while facing forward and stopping the full force of the attack.

"But you have to understand that their overall will is bound to ultimately turn toward destruction!"

This time, Akuto's left fist flew toward Marine.

"This comes down to who the meteor ends up falling on!"

Marine replied with his own left.

Their fists audibly slammed into each other's face at the same moment.



Bones creaked.

Blood flew.

Teeth broke.

It all formed a single shockwave that flew back from their heads.

For an instant, the two of them stopped.

"Hah. A meaningless fistfight is surprisingly painful."

"That's what petty stubbornness gets you. It'll stop if you give up, though."

Marine seemed to be provoking Akuto, so he laughed.

"Don't joke. I'm sticking with this to the end."

As he spoke, he healed his wounds with mana and Marine did the same.

The battle would only end once one of them ran out of willpower.

Akuto dug his feet into the ground.

Marine did as well.

Their four feet gouged holes into the stony mountain peak.

They faced each other with only a few dozen centimeters between them.

"Shall we do this?"

"I was just about to start."

It was unclear whether Marine or Akuto was first, but their fists crossed at high speed and their heads were harshly rattled.

"Do guys get stupider the stronger they are?" asked Yoshie as she watched Akuto and Marine's confrontation on a monitor.

"Based on these two examples, it would seem so," answered Korone.

"But why are they fighting?" asked Yuuko in fear.

"We have concluded it is because they are stupid," calmly replied Korone.

Yoshie was borrowing the control room. Keena and Korone had arrived twenty or so minutes earlier and Akuto had left them there before pursuing The One.

Keena had been opposed to it and had insisted she go along if he did go, but Korone had seriously demanded she remain behind.

"After seeing what happened to Etou Fujiko-san, you cannot be careless."

It was only then that Yoshie had learned of Fujiko's fate, but she had fought off sorrow and remained calm.

As the others fell into sorrow, she had done everything she could to analyze the documents Fujiko had left behind.

As a result, she had found support for what Akuto and Marine were arguing and she decided to explain what that meant to everyone.

"I need to explain this all from the beginning."

With that, she opened a connection to Brave and the yacht Lily was flying. Those two also needed to understand the situation.

<I'm listening,> replied Lily.

Brave seemed to be in a situation where he could not speak, but he gave a breath to show he was listening.

"Listen up," continued Yoshie. "The Formless Power is a supernatural power that existed before our mana civilization."

<And the imperial bloodline has the right to control it?> asked Lily.

"Right. And that was when the Jewel Branch of Hourai and the Swallow Cowrie were created. The danger of the Formless Power was also alluded to at the time, but it only vaguely says it 'could easily destroy mankind'."

<Right now, that doesn't seem like a lie or an exaggeration.>

She almost seemed to be joking, but Lily's tone was serious.

"Exactly. Anyway, this is where it gets complicated. They researched the brains of those who could use the Formless Power and the result of that research was mana. Mana is an artificial Formless Power. It was the success of that research that brought our mana civilization to mankind."

Yoshie's words brought silence.

<I take it that history was completely hidden.>

Lily was the first to break the silence.

"I was only taught that the imperial family began the mana civilization," groaned Yuuko.

"I cannot find anything referencing this in the databases I have access to," agreed Korone.

“And the technologies and research that went into that research of the Formless Power were all deemed black magic. Thinking about it now, the rituals concerning the demon king and the gods’ worship of the Law of Identity were linked to the Formless Power.”

As she spoke, Yoshie checked the documents Fujiko had left.

<But the black magicians remained, didn’t they?>

Yoshie immediately answered Lily’s question.

“But none of them knew true black magic, did they? This is nothing but speculation, but perhaps the origins of our mana civilization were disguised as a harmless theme park. The Merlai are the descendants of that and a group of them that worshiped the Formless Power fled under the ocean to form the Republic.”

<Eh?> said Lily in surprise.

“If we assume that, a lot starts to fit together,” agreed Korone.

Yoshie nodded and continued on.

“That would also explain the two Formless Powers that Akuto-kun and Marine mentioned. The one used by Marine or Nonimora is the Formless Power sealed inside the Swallow Cowrie and the one used by the people is the one that could destroy the world.”

"About that. What is the difference between the two?"

It must have bothered Korone to not have any data on this because she asked an honest question for once.

"Most likely, the Formless Power sealed within the Swallow Cowrie came from outside the universe."

<Outside the universe?>

Lily was surprised once more.

"I don't have any proof yet, though. On the other hand, the one granting the people's wishes could be called our collective subconscious."

"Then the reason those two are fighting..." muttered Korone.

Yoshie sadly shook her head.



"Exactly. They have reached the same conclusion based on conjecture. The people's collective subconscious has produced a new power that mana cannot influence and that has called in the meteor."

<So the meteor is the result the people wanted?>

"That's what it would mean," said Yoshie in resignation. "And even if it isn't, we don't know whether the meteor can be eliminated or not."

"But..." said Keena. "But if everyone hopes for the meteor to go away, won't it happen?"

With a serious expression, she brought her hands together as if praying.

Yoshie nodded as if to say she knew that.

"Of course... Of course that's what I want to happen. But..."

How many people would be able to forgive the Republic's people in this situation? And Akuto could easily tell what the imperial people were thinking.

A heavy silence fell.

It was Lily's cheerful voice that finally broke it.

<I see. So I need to go investigate the Swallow Cowrie in the Merlai village. At least, that's what those documents seem to say.>

"Eh?" asked Yoshie.

<They say to investigate the Merlai village, don't they? Um...what was it? The sealing capsule and ship to the star inside the Merlai tower.>

Lily spoke lightly and Yoshie could only answer.

"Y-yes. That's the Swallow Cowrie. The other two are the Robe of the Fire Rat and the Dragon Neck Jewel."

<And those are dependent on the demon king, right?>

"Y-yes. The Robe of the Fire Rat supposedly opens the door to the world of the afterlife. We have that one and it may be like high level necromancy. Or maybe it's a device to travel between dimensions. Anyway, the other is Peterhausen. If you sum it up, that one acts as combat ability for the demon king, a device, and a guide."

Yoshie answered the question, but she could not help but ask a question of her own.

"Hey, what are you planning to do?"

<I just can't stand not doing anything.>

Lily's voice contained an embarrassed smile.

"But..."

<There are almost no mysteries left, but we might find a way to stop the meteor if we look into the formation of the world and its connection to the Formless Power.>

Yoshie could not respond and Lily continued speaking lightly.

<Well, to be more specific, I won't be satisfied until I go on a bit of a rampage.>

After ending the transmission, Lily turned toward the student council officers.

"You all don't like the sound of possibly dying, do you?"

The three of them were taken aback by the sudden question.

"No, arinsu."

"No, gya."

"Guga."

"I didn't think so."

Lily looked up at the ceiling from the yacht's pilot seat.

"Why are you asking that, arinsu?" asked Michie. "I-I mean, I know that meteor is falling, arinsu. But..."

"Th-that's right, gya." Kanna sounded worried. "That's a bad omen, gya. You were the one that said there was a chance we could do something about this, gya."

"Well... I was just thinking that there's a possibility this path is leading

us somewhere different from normal."

Lily's voice was serious for once.

"President, don't get so serious, gya."

Kanna tried to laugh it off, but Lily turned a serious look in her direction. Kanna's smile stiffened and this time Lily began laughing.

"Ah ha ha ha ha."

"Heh...heh heh..."

Michie gave a stiff smile as well.

"Guga guga guga."

Once the reserved Arnoul asked whether it was okay to laugh, Kanna finally began smiling too.

"I guess what I'm saying is, I want to be with all of you when I die."

Embarrassment filled Lily's smile.

"Don't say that, arinsu."

"Yeah, gya. We already knew that, gya."

"Guga."

The three officers gave embarrassed smiles as well.

The yacht's autopilot then gave a warning tone and the ship began descending.

"We've arrived," said Lily.

They had arrived in the center square of the Merlai village.

"But...this is strange, gya."

Kanna was watching the village through a monitor.

"There is no one here, arinsu," agreed Michie.

"I don't detect any danger."

Lily checked the monitor, exited the yacht's hatch, and looked around.

"But it it's too quiet."

The Merlai village was surrounded by a forest and contained abundant

nature. The houses were made of wood and they looked fairly shabby. However, the most notable fact was the complete lack of people. If they were in the houses, they would have at least peeked out as the yacht approached.

"There should be quite a few residents..."

Lily used a glance to tell the three officers to be on their guard.

Kanna lowered down and her ears pricked up. Her ears and nose were especially sensitive.

"That way, gya."

She pointed outside of the village.

"What's over there?"

"A dog's voice and Nonimora's voice as she fights, gya."

"A dog? So is it The One, arinsu?"

After Michie's comment, they all ran that way.

The tower was visible ahead of them.

"The tower. Does that mean what I think it does?" muttered Lily.

The sealing capsule, the ship to the star, and the Swallow Cowrie were there.

"Is The One still after something, gya?" asked Kanna.

The others' eyes began to glitter.

"Does that mean there's something he still hasn't done, arinsu?"

"If so, it means we still have a chance!"

Lily grinned as she and the three officers slid into the front yard of the laboratory below the tower.

There they found The One and Nonimora fighting.

"You really were after the village!"

Nonimora stood at the laboratory's entrance while spinning a spear around.

"I tried to be as careful as possible, but I ended up putting this off until the end."

The One slowly approached Nonimora.

That was when the two of them noticed Lily's group approaching.

"New enemies?"

Nonimora turned a sharp glare toward Lily because she did not know the girl.

Noticing that look, Lily audibly struck the glove on her hand.

"Nope. We're here to help."

The three officers walked up behind her.

"We're here too, arinsu."

"Gya."

"Guga."

The three of them prepared for combat. Kanna had already fully transformed into a beast while Michie and Arnoul began moving to either side.

"Hm, so I'm surrounded."

The One looked around.

The student council was used to working together, so The One truly was surrounded.

"Now, then. How about you just give up?"

Lily held up a fist.

"It is true I don't think I can win against all of you while in this body."

Despite declaring his own weakness, the dog smiled fearlessly.

"But sometimes you can get lucky. I should manage somehow."

"Lucky?" Lily grinned. "I see nothing but bad luck for you here."

"You will eventually understand," said The One.

But before he finished speaking, Lily began her attack.

"Is that...so!?"

Something could be heard cutting through the wind and Lily's hand stretched toward The One even more quickly than the sound.

"Tch!"

The dog evaded with his canine swiftness, but Lily gave a fearless smile.

"Hah!"

With that shout, the direction of her arm turned at a ninety degree angle.

"What!?"

Her arm was now headed for the point The One had jumped to.

"Gwah!"

The fist's second attack struck him on the side and sent him flying away.

"This is my special technique."

Lily bared her teeth.

While still flying through the air, The One righted himself, landed on all fours, and looked to Lily in surprise.

"There shouldn't be any mana in this area."

"I came on a yacht that I loaded with a mana disseminator and energy

generator!"

Lily launched another attack.

Bringing those two things would allow one to use magic and the area was already densely filled with mana, but it was the same for the enemy.

"In that case, I can fight on even footing!"

The One created a mana shield to block Lily's attack.

Mana light was deflected with a dull noise, but Lily still looked confident.

"Even footing? We aren't even!"

She began launching attack after attack into the shield that had defended against her.

"Oh!"

The One cried out in surprise as the impact knocked the shield and him away.

"Ohh! Not bad!" said Nonimora cheerfully.

"Don't underestimate someone who gets into as many fights as I do."

Lily proudly placed a hand on her hat.

"Now, there's a lot I want to ask you about."

She cracked her fingers and approached The One.

He seemed to have taken damage because his canine mouth was gasping for breath.

"Heh. Do you think you've already won?"

Whether it was a bluff or not, scorn filled his voice, but Lily paid it no heed.

"I have already won. In fact, a little puppy can't put up a satisfying fight!"

She launched the next attack and the single tremendous impact instantly broke through The One's shield. Her anger had clearly increased her strength.

"Ohhh!"

The One was beginning to panic.

Once her fist instantly sank into his forehead, his voice of confusion

became a scream.

"Gyaaaah!"

His forehead was pressed down, his jaw was slammed to the ground, and the recoil sent him spinning through the air.

Once he flew up into the air, Lily grabbed him with her left hand.

Her open hand jabbed up to his jaw and constricted his windpipe.

"Gwoh..."

He was lifted further into the air by his throat.

"Hah. I've got myself a dried dog."

She sneered at him.

"Ohh, the president is a little different from normal, gya!"

"She's definitely angry, arinsu!"

Kanna and Michie grew excited.

"Now, now. Don't make a fuss. This is about at my full strength."

She grinned and squeezed The One's throat even further.

"Gh...gh..." he groaned.

"Now, how about you start talking?" asked Lily. "First, you can tell us who you are."

"Hm? What are you doing? You aren't going to kill him?" asked Nonimora as she walked over.

"The situation is pretty complex, so I have some questions for him."

With that explanation, she added her right hand to his throat and shook him.

"D-dammit..." He continued groaning for a while, but he could not resist much in a dog's body and he must have given up because he began speaking in an arrogant tone.

"You leave me no choice. What do you wish to know?"

"Don't get so full of yourself, dog. I asked you who you are, so answer me."

She added more strength.

"Kh... I am what you would refer to as an alien."

"An alien?"

Lily had expected that answer, but it was still a surprise to hear it said aloud. It seemed the same was true of the others because their eyes opened wide as well.

"That's right."

He spoke sadly as if he had given what answer he could, so Lily said something else.

"Just to be clear, we can't detect anything outside the solar system."

"No, you can't. But there is something beyond there: another universe."

The One seemed to feel more leeway because he began speaking like a teacher.

"In other words, this world ends within the solar system?" asked Lily to make sure.

"Yes. This world goes no further than that and the other world is more or less the same."

"So you broke through the barrier and passed between worlds to come

here?"

"Yes, but I was only able to come as a thought entity. What you refer to as the Formless Power is an aggregation of the minds belonging to the aliens like me."

"Wait. Aren't there two different types of Formless Power?" asked Lily.

"Yes. We are...That is, the alien thought entities are stored in this tower."

He pointed a front paw toward the tower using what limited movement was available to him.

"That's the power Marine and I use, isn't it?" asked Nonimora.

"Yes, but the Jewel Branch of Hourai created to control it ended up able to release the full Formless Power."

That comment gave Lily a very bad feeling.

"The full Formless Power?" she shuddered. "You mean the Formless Power the Republic's people are using is mankind's Formless Power?"

Mankind's Formless Power would be an aggregation of the race's minds. She could not predict what it would mean for that energy to be used while the race still lived, but she doubted it was anything good.

"Yes. Man once sealed it as it was uncontrollable, but it has now been revived by happenstance."

The One spoke as if it were funny.

"Uncontrollable?"

"Yes. I am the last survivor of my race. In its own destruction, my race became the Formless Power and ended up inside the capsule you refer to as the Swallow Cowrie. I am a thought entity that separated from that."

The One's tone belied the horrifying words.

"In your own destruction, you became the Formless Power? How were you destroyed?"

"By attempting to use the Formless Power in our world, of course."

"You don't mean..."

"Yes. The Formless Power supposedly has no will, but for some reason, it works to destroy its race. Although that might be nothing more than a manifestation of the race's hatred for and desire to destroy other parts of itself."

"That means..."

Lily felt a something cold run along her spine and The One laughed as if to confirm her fears.

"Ha ha ha ha! Yes! It is working to destroy mankind. That is exactly what is happening now! The Formless Power called in that meteor!"

The student council officers and Nonimora were left speechless.

"But you don't gain anything from destroying another race! Do you just want to spread destruction?"

Lily alone was able to speak and The One laughed off her question.

"Ha ha! Of course not. I'm not Sakura Kei. The Formless Power works as an infinite power in its world, but once it destroys a race, it is released outside the world once more. You could say it grows volatile."

"So if mankind is destroyed..."

"Precisely. The Formless Power will grow volatile and I will be able to free it. Or to put it in more common terms, my race will finally be able to rest in peace. It is only natural to not want the minds of your race to be used as mere power!"

The One began laughing as if he had gone insane.

Lily and the others felt something cold sinking in their stomachs. If that were the truth, a truly repulsive fate awaited them. Humanity would be

destroyed, wander the universe as a group consciousness, and ultimately begin the destruction of another universe's thought entities.

"What the hell!? I refuse to believe that! It sounds like a curse!"

Lily shouted out, but not at The One or anyone at all.

However, The One still sneered at her.

"Hah! That's right! It's a curse! The universe itself is structured like a curse! If you understand, then settle down and be destroyed! There is no stopping it now!"

He laughed triumphantly and Lily gathered strength in the hand reaching toward his throat.

"Don't laugh!"

"Gh..."

His face began to change color. Even with his canine face, it could visibly be seen growing a reddish purple.

Muscles and veins appeared on the surface of her hands as she strangled him.

"If you're a thought entity, that means it doesn't matter if you die,

doesn't it?"

"Gh... Ha...ha... Exactly. Kill me...if you like... It will...change nothing..."

His neck gave an audible snap and the dog stopped speaking.

"P-president... There was more you could have asked him," said Michie in confusion.

However, Lily glared harshly back at her.

"I've heard enough. The origin of mana, the gods' worship of the Law of Identity, and that which has protected the imperial family. It all connects together. All that's left is figuring out what to do about the meteor."

Lily pointed into the blue sky even though nothing could be seen there yet.

"We aren't all going to die are we, arinsu?"

Michie sounded worried.

"I don't like it from a humanitarian perspective, but we should probably evacuate."

Yoshie spoke calmly after hearing the situation from Lily.

She always had a cool personality, but it was still impressive that she did not panic in this grave situation.

“Evacuate? Where are we even supposed to go?”

Yuuko’s voice was trembling and she had grown completely pale.

Almost everyone in the command room had panicked. The battle was only growing worse and the Republic showed no sign of ending its invasion despite Marine swearing he could stop them. Or rather, the Republic’s physical weapons had stopped attacking, but the rain of colorless flames caused by the Formless Power continued to pour down on the empire. That showed just how much the Republic’s people hated the empire.

“Well, the surface is out of the question,” said Yoshie.

She opened a mana screen that displayed a simulation of the meteor strike.

When the giant meteor struck the earth, it created an explosion large enough to penetrate the atmosphere and it tore up the earth’s crust. The shockwave that spread in a ring circled all the way around the planet and blasted upwards on the opposite side like a volcano eruption. Simply put, everything from the surface to a few kilometers up would be utterly destroyed and very few humans lived more than three kilometers above ground.

"We could flee to space, but our resources would not last," said Korone.

The moon base had been destroyed and the space station had lost almost all functionality.

"Listen. I've thought about this as rationally as I could and...well, it would take a while to explain, but the only one to truly survive will be Soga Keena," said Yoshie.

"Eh?"

Yuuko was dumbfounded.

Keena looked shocked and leaned toward Yoshie.

"W-wait. We can't let that happen. What do you mean?"

But Yoshie was perfectly calm.

"As I said, it would take a while to explain. First, we have to assume my theory is correct. That is, the theory that this world is a fiction someone created. In that case, the key to all this is the Law of Identity. If the Law of Identity and the empress who can communicate with her and use various special items survive, we can prevent the creation of humanity's complete Formless Power."

"But how can you ensure her survival?" asked Korone.

"The Swallow Cowrie is a spaceship and a storage capsule. She will be placed inside, put in a state of cold sleep, and sent into orbit.

"Eh?"

Keena was at a loss for words and a stir passed through the Suhara followers in the command room.

"If we do that, it should give us about a millennium of leeway," calmly continued Yoshie.

"A millennium!? What are you talking about? Are you saying everyone else will die?" shouted Yuuko in confusion.

But Yoshie still remained calm and nodded.

"You can't think of death like that. If my theory is correct, there is an afterlife and the Robe of the Fire Rat can be used to move to and from it."

"Eh? Then..."

Keena appeared to have realized something.

"Yes. Only the demon king can use it, so this will be our plan: the empress, the demon king, the Jewel Branch of Hourai, the Robe of the Fire Rat, the Dragon Neck Jewel, and the Swallow Cowrie will be brought to the old space station in orbit. The empress will be put in cold sleep and the demon king will enter the world of the afterlife once the meteor hits."

"What about the other people?" asked Yuuko.

"All of them, myself included, will die," said Yoshie jokingly. "Every single one."

"W-wait..."

"I understand you're hesitant, but we have no choice," declared Yoshie.

Silence fell and it was Keena that broke it.

"But what will A-chan do in the afterlife?"

"I don't know."

"Eh?"

"I really don't know. It's possible he'll be able to bring everyone back, it's possible there'll be nothing he can do, and it's possible only he'll be able to come back."

Yoshie shook her head as she spoke.

"W-wait. How irresponsible can you be?" protested Yuuko.

"Emotionally, I'm against it too, but we have no other option."

Yoshie shrugged.

Punch, be punched, and heal.

Akuto and Marine repeated that process countless times.

Despite wounds they could not heal in time appearing on their bodies, they continued to give more wounds to each other.

Each strike was enough to easily smash stone, but they were receiving those blows again and again.

"What good is being so stubborn if it won't even stop the war!?"

"It's better than refusing a ceasefire because of a grudge over a girl!"

"You won't gain anything by winning here!"

"This is more valuable than your outburst of anger!"

Even so, the speed of their barrages began to drop.

After a punch, they would rest and their shoulders would rise and fall as

they gasped for breath.

"Aren't you just about out of strength?"

"Your chin is rising. You haven't trained enough."

As they insulted each other, they punched the other in the gut.

"I can't believe we're fighting when we might all be destroyed soon," said Marine.

"Long ago, there were stories about all mankind joining together when an extra-universal threat arrived."

Akuto gave a cynical smile.

"Looks like those were lies."

"There were also stories of the world being united by a great wise man or dictator."

"Those were lies too."

"It's a bit heartbreaking, but I guess it doesn't matter."

"Agreed. By the way, aren't you about at your limit?" spat out Marine while gasping for breath.

"Not even close," said Akuto while panting heavily.

"Liar."

"Then let's settle this. Let's see which is stronger, the willpower of a nation or anger over a girl's death."

Hearing that, Marine smiled as blood flowed from his lips.

"Sure."

The two of them raised their fists and the air around them roared.

Two whirlwinds spun up and formed tornados that crashed into each other.

In the center, the two of them clashed fists.

Blood spray, pieces of flesh, and fragments of bone mixed into the tornados.

It must have lasted for several minutes, but then they suddenly stopped and the tornados vanished.

The two battered men were visible once more.

Their fists had lost their original form and they pressed those simple masses of flesh into each other's face.

Akuto's knees bent and he wobbled, but before he fell, Marine collapsed backwards.

Dust rose into the air and Marine stared blankly up into the sky.

"So anger...outdoes a nation," he muttered.

"That's probably the natural state of things."

Akuto pulled his feet out of the ground, walked over to the Jewel Branch of Hourai, and picked it up.

"What will you do now?" asked Marine.

"It may be hopeless, but I'm still going to try and stop the meteor," he answered.

However, the situation had advanced in the complete opposite of what Akuto had expected.

To stop the war, Brave had attempted to persuade Marine's sister on the Republic's front lines, but he had only succeeded once the Republic's people accepted the existence of the meteor.

"Understood. I will have the military withdraw," said the princess who was Marine's sister.

But Brave did not feel delighted that she understood. This was the result of showing her the data Yoshie had sent him.

It was also her reaction to seeing Marine's defeat on the monitor, so it was not a good sign for anyone.

"I'd rather not point it out, but isn't it a bit late to change your mind?" said Brave.

The two of them faced each other on the bridge of the princess's ship because she had invited him in to negotiate.

However, she merely smiled calmly.

"That is how politics work."

"Anyway, you can help the empire stop the meteor by-..."

She cut him off.

"We will be returning to the bottom of the sea. That gives us some small chance of survival."

"Eh? You can't mean that!"

"The odds of stopping the meteor with our technology are more or less zero, so we will choose the path of survival. The ocean is several thousand meters deep and some areas are sure to escape the destruction."

"But..."

Brave refused to give in, but the princess's expression did not change.

"This is how politics works. By the way, I could invite you in as an honorary citizen."

Brave shook his head.

"No thank you. I have my own job to do."

Brave left while filled with despair.

Chapter 5: Farewell, Mankind

Needless to say, Akuto and Hiroshi did not immediately agree to Yoshie's plan.

"We might still be able to stop the meteor."

"I agree with aniki."

Yoshie had opposed that view.

"At the very least, it can't be controlled with the Jewel Branch of Hourai," she said calmly.

For a while, Keena had been swinging the Branch like a magic wand, chanting strange spells, and focusing her mind as much as she could, but she could only use as much magic as mana allowed and nothing special happened.

"I understand that, but still."

"I get what you're trying to say and I know you don't like giving up, but we have no physical means of dealing with the meteor."

"Is the Formless Power really that great?"

"Yes. It's the power of an entire race's will. Unless there is only one human left alive, there is nothing we can do."

"Then if we can combine all of mankind's wills...!"

Hiroshi's eyes glittered as if it was a wonderful idea, but Yoshie immediately rejected it.

"We couldn't get through to the Republic and we can't harness the power of the wills of those in non-mana civilizations. The Formless Power is like a dreadful curse."

"Then we really can't do anything?"

"It doesn't seem so," said Yoshie with a sigh. "But I think everyone but Akuto-kun can do whatever they want."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"His role is to travel to the world of the afterlife, so we can't have him die before that. Of course, the empress will be put in cold sleep, so we can't have her hurt before or after that either. Hiroshi-kun, your role is carrying the capsule into orbit as Brave, but everyone else can die before or after that without issue."

"That sounds like complete nonsense."

Akuto seemed confused.

"All I'm saying is that those who remain need to be prepared to die."

Anyway, the plan will begin tomorrow and the meteor will hit tomorrow evening. Until then, most everyone can do whatever they want. Even suicide would be fine."

Yoshie shrugged and did her best to sound like she was joking.

"I still can't accept it," complained Lily.

Snacks were piled up on the student council room's table and the three officers were sitting at the table and devouring the snacks.

"Yeah, convenience store snacks are pretty pathetic for a last meal, arinsu."

Michie's comment put a bitter look on Lily's face.

"That's not what I meant. I was talking about having no way to resist this."

"But all the stores were closed, so we couldn't find anything appropriate for a last supper, gya," complained Kanna.

"Shut up. We aren't on death row, so of course our last food isn't gonna be anything good. And what would you want if you could choose?"

Michie and Kanna thought about that before answering.

"Rice and miso soup."

"A rare steak with potatoes."

Lily gave a scornful laugh.

"That's not much different from snacks. You never ate many snacks or soda because you'd gain weight, so this is your only chance to eat as much as you want. Go nuts."

"Come to think of it, you're right, gya."

"Melon bread has a lot of calories, doesn't it, arinsu?"

With that, the two of them began chowing down on the snacks.

"Guga."

As a L'Isle-Adam, Arnoul did not touch the food.

"Oh, right. You don't eat. ...Ah! Headmaster!"

Lily spoke up in surprise as the headmaster popped in behind Arnoul.

"I had nothing to do, so I came by to eat some snacks."

He reached for some potato chips.

"You really don't have anything to do?" asked Lily in amazement.

"Due to my age, the temples didn't send me any job requests, so I just have a lot of free time," he complained.

The temples had asked the other teachers to run around and attempt to calm the panicking residents as much as possible.

"But don't you have a family to spend this time with?"

"My age is in the triple digits, so I don't have anything like that." He gave a dry laugh. "I apologize there isn't a younger guy you young ladies could spend your final hours with."

"Don't be..."

Lily smiled bitterly, but Kanna began making a fuss.

"That's right, gya! This lack of guys is unforgivable, gya!"

"Guga."

Arnoul rebuked her, but Michie joined in.

"You're right, arinsu! A youth without a single lover is simply unforgivable, arinsu!"

"Gya, gya."

"Settle down. There aren't that many guys who are a match for us," said Lily while tossing some chocolate into her mouth.

"President, you're the lucky one, gya. You've at least had guys approach you, gya."

"That's right, arinsu. No one never even came to us, arinsu."

The two of them began making a fuss again.

"Quiet down. The world could be destroyed at any time, so go confess to a guy you like," said Lily coolly. "That's your lesson for the day."

"Mh. When I found a good guy, I should've gone in for the attack, gya."

"That just makes you a wolf girl, arinsu."

"I don't want to hear that from a vampire girl, gya." Kanna then asked a sudden question. "More importantly, president, is there anything you've left undone, gya?"

"Yes, there is. Remember what I asked in front of the tower about

whether you were prepared to die?"

"What about it, gya?"

"What did you mean by that, arinsu?"

"I think I was hoping to die in battle. If this is the end, I think I wanted to go out in blaze of glory. But in reality, I have to sit around eating snacks as the end arrives."

She gave a self-deprecating smile.

"That's another form of youth," said the headmaster quietly. "I doubt it will cool your blood, but not everyone can be a hero. When giving up is the only option, you should do so."

"I wanted to do everything in an exciting way."

"Just like all things, the end of the world happens quietly and with gradual decline. It was apparently the same with the civilizations that were destroyed in the past. However, this may not be the end. That boy may still do something."

"Sai Akuto," muttered Lily.

Meanwhile, someone was going through his final goodbyes with his girlfriend.

Hiroshi and Yuuko were walking along a beach.

"Sorry this wasn't very exciting," apologized Yuuko.

Hiroshi frantically shook his head.

"Don't be! This wasn't your fault! None of the stores were opened in town and our conversations all took a depressing turn."

"Yeah...but this feels weird. The world is supposed to be destroyed soon. And even if not, everyone will die."

She stared out to sea as she spoke.

"I-it'll be fine. Even if we die, we won't really die. That is, there's an afterlife, s-so it'll be fine even if we die."

Despite his words, it did not feel real to him.

"I heard all that from Yoshie-san, but can we really believe that? I mean, I didn't really understand it all, but she said we might be nothing more than characters in a story someone thought up."

She clung to him and could not hide her unease.

He felt the weight of her body and found he simply could not believe

what Yoshie had said.

"It really is strange. What does it mean that this world might be fictional?"

"I know. If we die...we'll die, won't we? I don't want that."

"Yeah..."

He could only nod.

"And Hiroshi-kun, you'll be taking Keena-chan...the empress into space, won't you? And then I won't be able to see you."

"We have no choice," he said amid his confusion. "It's an important job and it's possible everyone can be revived if it goes well."

But despite his words, he simply could not believe it.

"That isn't going to happen!" shouted Yuuko. "I've been thinking about it myself and I'm definitely me!"

She pressed her face into his chest and cried.

"I-it'll be okay. Once Brave... Once I finish the mission, I can do whatever I want, so I'll stop the meteor on my own. I can fly through space, so..."

Yuuko looked up at that.

"Really?"

"Really. I'll protect you. I'll protect mankind."

"You're amazing. You're a real hero."

"Don't worry. I'll protect you. I'll protect you."



As he repeated himself, he was not sure if he was lying, telling the truth, trying to end the current conversation, or deceiving Yuuko.

Nevertheless, he felt lying was the one thing he could not do.

And then the concept of death seemed to assault him. He had almost died countless times, but the feeling this time was completely different.

"I'll...protect you..."

He repeated himself again and kissed Yuuko.

"We now have permission to go through with the plan. The official story is that Soga Keena is escaping to space."

Yoshie gave that report upon entering the conference room in the Merlai village.

Only Akuto was inside that conference room, the Robe of the Fire Rat sat in front of him, and he was reading the user's manual.

"The official story?" he asked while looking up from the manual.

"The Robe of the Fire Rat and its effects haven't been accepted by the public. In fact, I'm not even sure if it'll actually work."

"It will," immediately cut in Akuto.

"Eh?"

"It will work. Etou-san protected it with her life, so it has to."

Without Fujiko, the odds were good The One would have destroyed it.

"True. If The One felt the need to destroy it, it must have some effect."

"You can put it that way too."

Akuto nodded and turned back toward the object shaped like a small parabolic antenna.

"Whether it works or not, we won't know what happens until we try it." Yoshie tilted her head. "How troublesome."

"The world of the afterlife, hm?" muttered Akuto. "If it exists, I wonder what it's like."

"Who knows. I only half believe it myself. If this world is false and it's something like the Law of Identity's dream, then there must be an afterlife." She gave a weak smile. "But then I start wondering what will happen if it doesn't exist."

"If even you're worried about that, I guess I can't blame myself for being

worried.”

“You’re overestimating me. Although I’m glad you think so highly of me.” She nodded and then stared into the distance. “They say you don’t even have the right to go to hell if you haven’t done good or evil, so I wonder where I’ll end up. At the very least, I haven’t done anything particularly good. I wonder what kind of afterlife the Law of Identity has prepared.”

“Who knows. But to me, you didn’t seem like someone who never did anything.” Akuto smiled. “And even if this world was created by the Law of Identity, we all have our own wills. If our wills were strong enough, do you think we managed to influence this world?”

“A strong will, huh? Even if we’re nothing but fictional characters?”

“Yes. I’m sure we set something large in motion. If I don’t believe that, there’s no reason to be here right now.”

“Setting something in motion with a strong will, hm?”

Yoshie nodded as if convinced of something and she then moved toward Akuto with a mischievous smile.

“In that case, I feel like putting my will to the test.”

“Your will?”

"Can a character's will cause the story's creator to act?"

With that, she stuck out her lips and closed her eyes.

"Wait, wait."

Akuto was confused.

"If the Law of Identity is mixed in with Keena-chan's will, she won't want us to kiss here, will she? This is a test to see if my will can overcome that."

She stuck her lips even further out.

"Eh? Wait..."

"Quit complaining. C'mon!"

As she urged him further, Akuto gave in and brought his lips in to kiss her.

However, he did so on her cheek.

"Mh!" she groaned. "Damn, so my will only goes that far."

With that comment, she smiled.

The next day, Akuto and the others prepared for their final journey after transferring to the Merlai village using the mana and energy provided by Lily's yacht.

They entered the laboratory below the tower and found the Merlai elder checking on the Swallow Cowrie.

"Looks like only one person will fit," said Nonimora, sounding disappointed.

The only ones there were the Merlai elder, Nonimora, Akuto, Hiroshi, and Yoshie.

"We can only give up," said Yoshie. "This is destiny."

It was a top secret mission and it was being kept a secret from the imperial people that Keena would be joining them.

"It feels like we're deceiving them and I don't like it," said Hiroshi as he watched a mana screen.

The news continually switched between the frightened people and the remnants of the imperial military joining together to destroy the meteor. The government was insisting they could destroy it by attacking once it arrived inside the atmosphere.

"All that's left is heading up to the station with the capsule and resting

there."

"Yes. From there, you can watch as the world is destroyed...or not if you'd prefer. But once you put the empress into cold sleep, you need to enter the world of the afterlife using the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"And no one knows what will happen then."

"Exactly," agreed Yoshie.

"I'm not afraid of dying!" exclaimed Nonimora as she jumped up and down. "The Merlai say a hero can transcend death!"

"That's good to hear. I just hope that's proof of something," said Yoshie. "Now, it's just about time."

As she checked her watch, the entrance opened.

Keena entered wearing a white dress.

This was not meant to be her grave clothes, but it seemed she had still been given the highest quality dress to be found in the palace. Other than the short sleeves, it looked a lot like a wedding dress.

The old knight who was her chamberlain and Korone stood behind her, but the old knight wordlessly stepped back after seeing her off.

"How pretty," said Hiroshi.

"Yes," agreed Akuto.

Keena had always hated frilly clothes like that, so the fact that she was actually wearing it showed her resolve. Some light makeup was even visible on her face.

"Everyone..."

She started speaking but trailed off.

However, no one minded that she did not continue and they urged her toward the capsule.

She silently climbed aboard and she finally spoke just before the door closed.

"Everyone! This isn't the end! This isn't goodbye!"

She forced out the voice as if to say she could tell.

"We know."

Yoshie and Nonimora smiled but shut the capsule with no regrets.

Hiroshi donned the Brave suit, picked up Korone who held the Robe of

the Fire Rat, and nodded toward Akuto.

Akuto picked up the capsule and floated up to ascend the tower.

Nonimora and Yoshie waved toward them and they nodded back rather than waving.

While lifting the capsule, Akuto and Brave ascended the tower and flew into the blue sky. Once they finally broke free of the atmosphere, Akuto preserved mana around them and Brave's gravitational control propelled them.

After opening the airlock of an abandoned space station, they set down the Swallow Cowrie.

The station was meant for experiments and it only had enough space for a few people to work, but it was enough for the four of them to speak. The earth was visible from one window and the meteor traveling through empty space was visible from the other.

After ensuring there was oxygen inside, they opened the capsule.

"I feel bad that only we'll survive," said Keena.

"Even so, this is the best option available. Please be prepared."

Korone reached into her bag and pulled out a futon.

The bag contained a virtual alternate dimension. It was dependent on the energy on the surface, so it was working now and would not once the surface was destroyed. That would likely be the final tool Korone would produce.

"Why a futon?" asked Akuto.

"Once the empress awakens, I must be there for her. This futon uses special fibers. If I place it over me and shut down my functions, I should remain fresh for a millennium."

"I see... Wait, remain fresh?"

Korone's response partially filled Akuto with exasperation.

"You could say it extends my expiration date."

As they spoke, the meteor began to fill the entire area of the window.

"Oh, not long now," muttered Hiroshi.

Korone elbowed him in the side.

"?"

He gave her a questioning look and she lay down in the futon.

"I will be going to sleep. See you next life."

Hiroshi then caught on.

"Oh... See ya, aniki. There's something I have to go do."

"What's that?"

"Even if it's hopeless, I need to try and stop the meteor. If I'm going to die regardless, the more exciting way is better, right?"

With that, he left the airlock without looking back.

After a quiet "psh" of air, silence fell.

Akuto felt that parting should have been more reluctant, but he concluded that showed just how much Hiroshi believed in the afterlife.

"Now, then."

He started to make his own preparations, but Keena called out to him.

"Hey, A-chan."

"What is it?"

He turned around and saw Keena with her head lowered.

"There's nothing to worry about."

As soon as he said that, she suddenly looked up.

Her face was red and contained no sign of depression or sorrow.

"Wh-what is it?"

"H-hey..."

She began fidgeting and started to say something else, but no words came out.

"A-are you okay?"

At that point, she finally began to speak.

"I don't want to think that this is the end, but I'll be sleeping for a long time, won't I?"

"Probably," he agreed. "But you might be woken up right away."

"Will I remember the time that passed while asleep?"

"No. To you, it will probably feel like sleeping a single night even if it lasts years and years."

"Then I'll be fine. You'll come wake me, won't you?"

She looked him in the eye as she asked that and he replied kindly to put her at ease.

"Of course."

"Okay. Then I can sleep without worrying. But can you promise me?"

She tilted her head and confusion filled his eyes.

"Promise? I just did. Don't worry. I will return even if I don't know where I'm going in the meantime."

"Not that. Promise me now..."

She began fidgeting again.

"Promise you what?"

"Marry me...right now."

"Marry...you?"

The sudden request shocked him.

"Y-yes. This isn't the end, but it might be the end. So do it as a promise...okay?"

She spoke quickly and forced a smile.

"Um...well..."

He was far too flustered to think straight.

"Can you not do it?"

Her expression clouded over.

"No, I didn't say that..."

"Then c'mon! I'm wearing a white dress right now... and you already kissed Nonimora-chan even if...um...the situation was different."

After saying that, she began shaking her hands around.

"A-are you serious?" he asked.

She answered after quickly grabbing his hands.

"Y-yes. I'm serious."

She quickly grew meek and lowered her head.

"In that case...okay."

"Really!?"

Her face lit up as she faced Akuto.

"Yes...really. But...um...what are we supposed to do?"

He was confused and Keena stared blankly back at him.

"C-come to think of it, I don't know."

"Well, most everyone we know is too young to get married, so we've never attended a wedding."



"Y-you put a ring on, don't you?"

"B-but we don't have a ring," said Akuto in confusion.

"Then what about this?"

Keena leaped into his chest.

"Eh?"

Her weight made him stagger and her lips trembled painfully as she looked up at him.

"A-chan..."

After saying his name, she fell silent and slowly closed her eyes.

Even he understood what this meant.

He pulled her toward him, brought his face in close, and gently kissed her.

The Swallow Cowrie's door closed and Keena waved on the other side of the window.

Akuto waved back and hit the switch that sent gas into the capsule.

The window fogged up and her face was gradually obscured.

Breathing in the gas quickly put her to sleep, but she continued waving until he could no longer see her.

Finally, an indicator appeared to show the cold sleep was complete.

After seeing that through, he stepped away from the capsule.

"Now, then."

He muttered to himself and prepared the Robe of the Fire Rat that sat in one corner of the room. It seemed to work by standing in front of the antenna-like device and hitting the switch.

"Akuto-san," said a sudden voice.

"Eh?"

He turned around and found Korone sitting up.

"I am glad you could have your fun."

"C-c'mon. Don't put it like that. And you weren't asleep? That's just mean."

Akuto looked embarrassed.

"My apologies. I merely thought I could act as a witness to mankind's destruction."

"Yes... I suppose it would be interesting to have someone who can tell the tale."

He had spoken half out of shock, but he realized that did in fact sound interesting.

"Then I'll leave the rest to you."

"Good."

She nodded, but then spoke up as if she had realized something.

"Um... Aren't you going to kiss me as well?"

"Are you serious?"

"I am joking."

"I thought as much."

He smiled, stepped in front of the Robe of the Fire Rat, and hit the switch.

And then he vanished.

Korone looked out the window.

No one was there anymore. If she stopped her own mechanical noises, she would likely be surrounded by complete silence. If she powered down, she would last for a millennium until someone came to wake her. If a mana civilization existed at the time, she could be fully regenerated,

but her data could be removed as long as they had electricity.

She accessed the gods one last time, but they had no real feelings about the issue.

<This simply means we did not carry out our mission. Everything will disappear.>

That was what the gods had to say.

No matter what she asked, they had only one thing to say in response.

<Everything will disappear.>

Korone felt it was not a bad thing to say.

However, she and Keena would remain. For a thousand years at least.

"What will remain once everything disappears?" she muttered.

At the very least, her data could be retrieved even after a millennium had passed.

Or would the universe itself disappear with Keena's death?

No answer came to her.

"For the gods, everything will disappear."

She looked out the window as she spoke.

For the gods, everything would indeed disappear.

She was nothing but a single terminal of a network and she had not gained a sense of self like the gods.

The meteor had approached enough for the flow of energy on its surface to be clearly visible. From her position, it appeared to be half as large as the earth. It was not actually that large, but she felt it would certainly destroy the earth.

The meteor appeared to be a mass of energy rather than a rock. It looked like an incandescent fluid whirling around in a spherical shape.

She then received a transmission from Hiroshi.

<Korone-chan, can you hear me?>

"Yes," she replied.

<I'm going to try to stop the meteor now.>

"Your odds of success are zero," she calmly told him.

<I know that, but do you have to put it so plainly?>

"If you understand, why did you continue with this?"

<Because I have to. I promised I would.>

"A promise? But the result will be the same either way."

<I know, but I want someone listening in the very end.>

"Understood. Let us speak."

<I'm going to charge in with a plasma ball. Can you see me?>

"I can."

She zoomed in her vision and saw a small light in the meteor's path.
That was Hiroshi.

<Here I go! Here I go... I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to say
right now. U-um... Should I let out a shout? I-I can't think of anything.>

"Hiroshi-san."

<What?>

"At the very least, you were a hero in the end."

<Thank-Ah! Wah!>

The transmission filled with static.

The light produced by Hiroshi was silently swallowed up by the light of the meteor.

"Farewell," said Korone quietly.

The meteor further approached the earth.

A portion of the fluid on the surface extended toward the earth like a tornado and formed a giant whirlpool on the ocean surface.

Seen from the surface, that was almost certainly the exact scene of destruction Yamato Bouichirou had once seen. In that whirl, he may have seen the forms of alien thought entities.

But the whirl quickly lost all meaning. The meteor itself approached the surface and the earth's crust was blasted outwards like splashing water.

To Korone, the scene was absolutely silent, but it was not difficult to imagine tens of thousands of people's screams mixed in with that ripped up crust.



The half sphere explosion caused the planet's atmosphere to swell outwards and to pulsate as if alive.

A shockwave travelled along the earth's surface and left at the collision point on the opposite side. After a short delay, a wave of crust and seawater followed.

After that wave passed, that portion of the surface could no longer be seen. Only the boiling ocean surface was visible through the smoke.

"Thus cometh the end."

Korone searched her data because she felt like reading a poem, but that data was on the network and had therefore been lost. The gods on the surface had already died.

"So that is how the world ends."

She rephrased her words.

"With a peacefully silent explosion."

After seeing that the earth had completely turned to a sphere of boiling magma and water, she climbed into the futon.

"Goodnight, everyone."

She spoke to no one in particular and the station's electricity cut out.

Chapter 6: Limbo

There was a gap in Hattori Junko's memories, but what she could remember was quite clear.

She remembered being burned by colorless flames.

That horrifying sensation that was not quite hot or painful returned to her. She had most certainly been inside that hell that had forced an endless mental terror on her rather than anything physical.

But now that sensation was only in her memories and there was nothing wrong with her body.

She was wearing clothes and standing at the waterside.

Waves were approaching and receding at her feet.

She stood at the ocean. She stood on a beach.

She looked around and concluded she was on the shore of a bay. She stood on a small crescent moon-shaped beach, the right side formed a rocky cape, a jungle lay behind her, and a giant cliff was to the left.

The cliff was not a normal cliff.

She looked up and it seemed to continue forever. It broke through the

clouds and as far as she could see.

She decided such a cliff was impossible.

Unless she was in some alternate world, that sight simply could not be.

The cliff seemed infinitely tall and wide. At the very least, it continued as far as the eye could see. Also, it was crumbling toward the ocean at a set speed. The surface of the cliff fell toward the ocean as if blocks were being torn off or CG polygon data was vanishing. Nevertheless, the cliff's location did not seem to change.

—Is that an infinitely appearing cliff?

Fear gradually filled her as she stood before the cliff that continued far past the clouds and into the heavens.

And then she noticed something even more frightening.

The sky above was dark.

There was no sun and the dark clouds pressed heavily down on the heavens.

Even on a cloudy day, the location of the sun was usually noticeable, but there was no sun in this world.

Oddly enough, she could still see her surroundings.

The amount of light was halfway between darkness and a cloudy day.

—Is this a virtual alternate dimension?

Suspecting that, she looked to the ocean, but she did not find any of the unique unnatural aspects of a virtual alternate dimension. If it was one, the waves would have an unnaturally steady tempo, but they did not.

—Am I...dead?

She began to wonder if this was the afterlife.

Fear further crept into her.

—I-if so...why am I here alone?

To distract herself from her fear, she tried thinking logically. If this were the afterlife, she would not be alone. A lot of other people would have died along with her.

—A-anyway, I have to go somewhere.

She tried walking and found she could move along the beach. She heard her footsteps on the sand.

She doubted she could approach the cliff, so there was nowhere to go but the jungle.

The jungle's dense vegetation formed a green wall she could not see past. Even if she had no choice but to go there, being unable to tell what lay ahead made her uneasy.

—Akuto...

In her unease, that name naturally came to mind, but she was not going to meet him here and it only increased her sense of emptiness.

Tears naturally formed and she wiped them away as they began trailing down her cheeks.

—If I can still think, it must mean I am not dead.

In that case, she would arrive somewhere if she continued walking, so she moved toward the jungle.

As she did, she heard a splash behind her and turned around in shock.

Someone was crawling up from the ocean.

She let out a shriek while taking a defensive stance.

The person appeared to have been washed up onto the beach.

—B-but I did not see anyone before.

She would not have been that careless, so she could only assume this person had appeared only a few moments before.

With more splashing, the person unsteadily got up.

It was a tall boy.

He suddenly raised his head and Junko could not mistake that face even if the hair was plastered down by the water.

—I-it can't be...

She was so doubtful that it took her a while to actually speak aloud.

He spotted her and managed to speak first.



"Junko!"

The voice settled it for her.

"Akuto!"

Without even thinking, she ran over to Akuto.

"Thank goodness. I really could find you here!" he said.

She leaped toward him and embraced him.

"Akuto!"

Her momentum sent them both toppling into the ocean with a tremendous splash.

"Wahhhhh! Akuto!"

She usually restrained herself, but she let loose and cried here.

But he seemed to find that suspicious because he raised her face from his chest and looked doubtful.

"Are you...really Junko?"

"H-how rude! And what about you!?"

When she asked that, she must have actually grown afraid because she quickly moved away from him and took a defensive stance on the beach.

"A-are you really...Akuto!?"

Seeing that, Akuto laughed.

"Ah ha ha ha ha. You really are Junko."

Seeing him holding his sides, her look of suspicion gradually changed to embarrassment.

"Y-you idiot! Of course I would be worried about that when I see someone who should not be here!"

"Well, yes. I understand being worried, but you were the one that defenselessly jumped into my arms."

He laughed again.

"D-dammit! This humiliation... I-it really is you!"

She pointed at him and he stopped laughing.

"Yes, we probably are both the real ones. After all, this is the world of the afterlife."

"Ehh?"

She was utterly shocked.

While Akuto and Junko were meeting, Hiroshi stood alone in a forest.

—This doesn't feel real at all. It doesn't feel any more dangerous than

being thrown into a different world.

Even if this was the world of the afterlife, he was worried that there was a risk of dying here.

“And why am I wearing the suit?” he complained when he noticed it.

He had not seen a mirror, but the visor lay before his eyes and he could see the suit on his hands.

However, he seriously doubted the suit was functioning. He had been unable to fly or attack and the monitor light within the visor was not lit. Even so, he could see through it and his movements were not obstructed. If the battery had simply died, the suit would have been much heavier.

He doubted he had simply been brought here as he was when he died. It seemed more likely one took on their image of themselves in the afterlife.

—In that case, the people I meet here might also appear as they envision themselves.

However, he saw no one in the forest and he could not think of any dead person that he wanted to meet.

As he thought, he found a path out of the forest. It appeared to be a narrow animal trail, but the trees thinned out as it went along and it led to a clearing.

—Is there anyone who was already dead that I want to meet?

He worried over that question and then a certain man's face came to mind.

—Come to think of it...

By the time he thought that, the man was already next to him.

"I didn't expect to meet you here," said a calm voice.

A man sat on a stump further along the path.

"Yamato...Bouichirou," muttered Hiroshi.

This was the man who had given him the Brave suit, he was the enemy who had once put together CIMO 8, and he was a time traveler. Thinking about it now, he was also the person who had most thoroughly understood the structure of the world.

"So it is you," said Bouichirou.

He wore the suit he had once worn and he gave a calm smile that did not seem appropriate to the situation. Hiroshi was not entirely sure why it did not seem appropriate, but that smile may have been what he did not like about Bouichirou.

"Come to think of it, Yuuko-san should have died too," he said.

He had completely forgotten. Otherwise, he would not have thought of Bouichirou as the first person to meet. He wondered why he had not thought of her first.

"Sorry about that. I hope you understand that a boy is not my first choice of who to meet here either."

The intelligence to understand what Hiroshi had meant and his pretentious manner of speech both irritated Hiroshi, but that was just the kind of man he was.

Hiroshi had no choice but to feel destiny at work in this meeting.

"I understand that this is the afterlife," said Hiroshi because Bouichirou seemed to understand everything.

"I suppose I arrived here before you, but it feels to me like I only just arrived."

"You only just arrived?"

Hiroshi was suspicious because a lot of time had passed since Bouichirou's death.

"Yes, just now. The passage of time may be different here."

"That may not be too surprising, but how did you know this was the afterlife?"

"CIMO 8 had a deep understanding of the world's structure. With The One as a subordinate, I understood most of it."

Now that he mentioned it, he would have been the one who had scouted The One.

"Then you understood about the Formless Power and everything else?"

"Yes, I understood it all from the beginning, but none of you would listen to me."

Bouichirou gave a cynical smile.

"It wasn't something we could believe back then."

Hiroshi felt guilty and tried to dodge the issue.

"I am not blaming you. I was working behind the scenes because I knew it was something the people would never understand."

"But The One was trying to destroy mankind."

"I was well aware. That was why I attempted to complete the ceremony

before he could act."

Bouichirou had attempted to exchange vows with the Law of Identity. At the time, they had not understood why his ultimate objective was to send mankind to another universe as thought entities, but it made a sort sense now.

"But that just seems unnatural."

"What is truly unnatural is that we can move about here in the afterlife. If mankind has been completely destroyed, all of the Formless Power will eventually be absorbed."

"So we can't rest easy just because this world here exists?"

"When it comes down to it, mankind has only two paths available. One is to be destroyed, become the Formless Power, and be used in another universe. The other is to become thought entities and shift to another universe of our own volition."

"But there might be another way," replied Hiroshi without thinking.

However, Bouichirou decisively shook his head.

"How many times do you think I travelled through time?"

Those words held great weight.

But for some reason, words of opposition left Hiroshi's mouth.

"But aniki would be able to..."

"Be able to what?"

The look in Bouichirou's eyes grew sharp.

Despite his confusion, Hiroshi was not going to let go of his theory.

"He...might be able to do a better job of it."

Bouichirou once again shook his head.

"You only think that because the Law of Identity chose him."

"Chose him?"

"The Law of Identity is the world's storyteller. That means we cannot escape what has been said of us no matter what. That is why I attempted to exchange vows with the Law of Identity and have the story of the world changed. In other words, I chose to have us shifted to another universe."

"You mean there is no third option?" asked Hiroshi in confusion.

"There is not," said Bouichirou with a nod. "Think about what has happened in this world of the afterlife. Why were we able to meet? Was

that not because it was convenient for the Law of Identity? Doesn't it seem like a sort of plot convenience? This 'aniki' of yours, Sai Akuto, hated the stories that the people blindly believed in, but hasn't he carried out the role of the protagonist in the story revolving around the Law of Identity? Can he truly escape that? Even in the afterlife, we are merely being forced into some sort of role or another. How are we to escape from the story that has been told of us? How are we to escape this eerie story structure?"

Hiroshi had no way of arguing against that.

"But if you can travel through time..."

Even so, he grew oddly stubborn.

"It would seem time in this world is linear, just like the human mind...no, just like a story. This is not a world of theoretical physics where the theory of relativity applies. That is why time travel is possible, but that linearity is another part of being a story. In other words, no matter how much you attempt to correct it, everything will be drawn back to the set story."

Bouichirou thoroughly explained the issue.

"But..."

Hiroshi trailed off as he suddenly realized why he was so intent on there being a third option.

He was not content with his role of hero.

"Can't you at least tell me how to travel through time? If you do...I can..."

He could not speak further, but he wanted to use this meeting with Bouichirou the best he could.

"You can what?" asked the man coldly.

"I can be the one to try to escape the story this time."

His voice was low yet determined.

Afterword

It has been a while, but this is Mizuki Shoutarou.

I am truly sorry for the long wait and I must thank everyone who looked forward to this novel and bought it.

After I finished writing Volume 11, I was troubled by a panic disorder and the depression it brought, so I was unable to write for an entire year and a half. They say a subculture can bring depression as you age, but that is exactly what happened to me and I felt as if I had witnessed the instant that a new superstition was born.

But my condition was nothing that lighthearted. At first, I could not ride trains, cars, or buses and I later suffered from chronic sleep disorders, headaches, and stiff shoulders. In fact, I still have sleep problems and sudden shoulder stiffness. I have not made a complete recovery, but I should be able to continue writing somehow or other. If you continue supporting me, I think even more strength will return to me. I know it is selfish, but I would still like to ask for your support.

All I have released since the publication of Volume 11 are things I had written beforehand and things that are not novels, but please understand that I have not abandoned this series. I know it sounds like I am making excuses, but I want to explain the delay.

Now, the story has reached its climax and there should be only one or two more volumes. I have not fully recovered and it may be another long wait, but I hope you will stick with me to the end.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone who was involved in this. I caused some far from ordinary problems on this one, so I do not have the words to properly thank my editor O-sama or Itou Souichi-sama. Please don't abandon this worthless author!

Not long until the end now! Please stick with me, everyone!





Prologue

I finally felt like writing it.

“It” being this story, of course. However, I must first talk about “stories”.

We read stories. It can be in movies, in serial dramas, in manga, or in novels. We of course read them for enjoyment, but that sense of enjoyment is often backed by the expectation of wondering what will happen next.

In other words, it is assumed there will be some form of ending.

Needless to say, there are some stories that seem about to end yet one does not want to end, but the fact remains that it is assumed that a story has an ending.

To view it in a rational light, a story is something in which the characters die or are saved.

That is why stories that move people – myself included – truly begin with their ending. It can be a tragedy or a comedy. Complex causal relationships gather toward a single conclusion and the power brought about by various coincidences and human fates burst open a single final point! The story exists for that final point. Whether it takes the form of the grim reaper’s scythe or the bond of the red string of fate, destiny exists for the ending.

And as everyone who has read this far knows, stories are fictional and yet we are still controlled by them in our real lives.

In other words...yes, we think of things from the perspective of the ending.

When a boy and girl meet, we ask whether they will end up together or part ways.

When a crime is committed, we ask if the criminal will escape or be captured.

When we live, we ask if we will be fortunate or fall into ruin.

Our minds are thoroughly infected by the virus that we call stories. There is no free will there.

Humans cannot perceive time as a sensation. We instead perceive it as a story.

In the early 2000's, I received a phone call from an old friend in front of my apartment in Yamato, Kanagawa. I assumed they were inviting me to hang out, but they instead informed me the ex girlfriend I had broken up with about half a year prior had died. I had not contacted her even once since we broke up, but my friend had been receiving news about her from someone else.

"Eh? Really?"

<Really. I'll call you again once I know more.>

"Oh, man. So you're serious."

<Yeah. It seems that's how it is.>

"Hm, I see. Thanks for telling me."

I remember that meaningless conversation.

At the time, I felt no confusion or sadness. That's just how it is.

But when the same friend called me the following day and told me the cause of death, I felt somehow urged forward. I couldn't sit still and a strange impatience sent cold sweat dripping down my cheeks. It was not that her death finally felt real. It had never felt real. I was never going to meet her again regardless. What difference did it make if that was now an eternal thing?

Her cause of death was truly stupid. She had horrible headaches and took a bit more of her medicine than usual. This was not a suicide with sleeping pills or anything like that. Sometimes your body grows accustomed to a drug and you have to take more of it. The direct cause of death was what they call Economy Class Syndrome. In other words, it was a blood clot in an artery. Lying in the same position for a long period of time without drinking any water had led to her death.

I briefly wondered if she would not have died had she not broken up with me. I'm not trying to boast, but I can be fairly attentive when it comes to looking after others. I would likely have been managing the medicine and having her do some light daily exercise. However, that was the exact reason she had broken up with me. She apparently found that side of me annoying.

I wondered if she might have lived had I been looking after her.

I knew that future was impossible. I knew that, but I continued asking the question.

That was the source of the impatient feeling.

She had chosen a death similar to suicide. That is, she had lived in a way that more easily tended towards death. She was oblivious when it came to her own health and yet she was sensitive to anything that threatened her mental state, so she chose inactivity over activity and she interpreted kindness as an attack. In the long run, that could be called constantly choosing death in multiple situations.

It is commonly said that any animal that chooses suicide is insane. There was a rumor of lemmings committing mass suicide, but that was proven to be false. (It was set up for a documentary.) There are several confirmed suicidal actions among living creatures, but as research has advanced, it has become clear that almost all of them are caused by parasites or toxins from another living creature. For example, the hairworm resides within a praying mantis host and has the praying mantis jump into a river. The hairworm can only mate within the water, so

it kills its host and jumps out into the water. Also, a certain type of wasp can control the brain of the roaches it lays its eggs in. The toxin it injects removes the roach's will and prevents it from feeling pain as the larva hatch and eat it from the inside. On top of that, the wasp guides it to the wasp's burrow while it can still walk, so it actually walks to its own grave.

Humans are living creatures, too. In that case, shouldn't we try to live no matter what? Isn't it unthinkable for humans to commit suicide?

Yes. Humans do not die by their own will.

So what is it that we call suicide?

There is a single answer.

Someone is controlling those human's minds.

Let me reiterate: our minds are infected by the virus that we call stories and someone injected that virus into us.

That is why humans commit suicide. They take a reckless action and they die.

But as is standard for parasites, stories also benefit humans.

People cannot perceive time as a sensation. We instead perceive it as a story. Without a perception of time, we would likely have never developed the intelligence we have. Stories are intelligence.

So should we cast aside those stories?

No, we must never do that.

If we do not do that, they will end.

Stories always end. For mankind, that ending is the time of destruction. That is the time in which we discover the objective of the one who implanted the stories within us.

Will something hatch within our brains?

Will we be devoured by something gigantic after our deaths?

If so, can you cast aside those stories this very instant?

We must think about the original human race and the origin of stories.

Now, let us go see the answer for ourselves.

Chapter 1: We Have a Life even in the Underworld

Junko made no attempt to move away from Akuto and he did not make her. A forest lay before them and they had to enter it. That alone would be worrisome enough, but this was the world of the afterlife. Technically, they did not know what this place was, but that was the only name they had for it. Whatever the case, they were definitely completely lost.

Ahead of them was a forest, behind them was an ocean, and both seemed to extend forever.

They stood on the beach and that shore felt like the scenery of an ending to Akuto.

"This isn't a virtual alternate dimension...or is it? Either way, look at this imagery."

"Yes, it is oddly appropriate for the imagery of the afterlife." Junko peered into the forest. "Didn't Dante's Divine Comedy begin in a forest?"

"I know what you mean, but we have no faith in that way. We have only borrowed that Christian imagery. It is strange that this is so fitting for imagery of the afterlife, though."



As he spoke, Akuto held Junko's hand and urged her into the forest.

"Anyway, the forest is the only place we can go."

The beach did not continue forever, but it was surrounded on either side by almost perfectly vertical cliffs.

"Y-yes. But it still worries me. And there is not a path through the forest."

She hesitantly followed him into the trees.

"I can clear a path for us," suggested Akuto.

But to their surprise, they found a small forest path after moving past two or three overlapping trees.

"Good, a path. That really helps," said Junko with a stiff smile.

"But this also means people have come here before."

Akuto stepped onto the path and looked ahead, but he could not see where it led. The path had no undergrowth, the dirt had been packed down, and it continued on while winding through the trees.

"Does this mean there is someone here?" asked Junko while looking around worriedly. "P-please give me a break... Honestly..."

"There's nothing to worry about," said Akuto as he moved ahead.

"Of course there is," she said while begrudgingly following him.

"Anyone here would be of the dead."

"We're dead too."

"I do not feel like it at all."

"Most of mankind should be dead. If we assume everyone is here, the threat should be no different from before."

"You really are quick to find an answer."

She had started walking hesitantly, but after a while, her pace grew lighter. Even so, she continued to cling to his arm and he matched his pace to hers.

"Looks like it's the same even here," said Akuto.

"Wh-what is? I feel like this world is a lot different from the one we lived in."

"No, I meant we can still see just fine even in the forest. Did you not notice? There's light here."

She looked around and realized he was right.

"Oh, now that you mention it. I could not see the sun, but I could still see on the beach."

"And yet the leaves are growing so thickly overhead. There's no light source and yet we can see. That's what it comes down to."

"Since this is the afterlife, it might not be that strange. Oh, right. Didn't beasts attack at this point in the Divine Comedy?"

She sounded afraid and they happened to hear a distant howl at that very moment.

"Eee!"

She jumped in fright, but Akuto could tell it was a four-legged beast such as a wolf or lion and he tilted his head at the howl that gave some sense of its form.

"I never heard a howl like this while working part-time at the zoo."

"R-really? Then is it a demonic beast?"

Junko's voice was still trembling.

"I doubt it. At any rate, there was no sign of life until now."

"No, there was not," she agreed.

The bestial howl ended.

"Hm," grunted Akuto as he came to some sort of understanding. "Then there must be a city at the end of the trail."

Junko's eyes opened wide at that.

"What? That cannot possibly-..."

She trailed off as they took a gentle curve and their vision opened up.

A city was visible down below. The two of them were standing in the mountains behind the school and they had a good view of the usual Imperial Capital.

"Wh-what...but...this is..."

She grew confused.

The capital had the same peaceful atmosphere as before the war, so it felt like they had travelled a few months back in time. Based on the sunlight, it was still a bit before noon. The difference in time of day helped make her feel dizzy.

Akuto had predicted this, but even he could not remain calm.

"I was right... But it's still a little surprising."

"H-how can you just accept this!?"

She lashed out at him both due to surprise and due to not understanding how he had predicted this.

"I have no proof, but I think this reflects our desires," he answered.

"Our desires? I still do not really understand."

"I had a feeling the things happening here were related to what you were imagining."

"It is true everything I was afraid of seemed to happen," she agreed.

"Yes, and that would explain why we can see without light and why we heard that beast in the forest."

"Perhaps."

Junko closed her eyes and focused her mind, but opened them again after a few seconds.

"But are you sure?"

"If this world – this world of the afterlife – does change based on our thoughts, only powerful thoughts must work."

"I should be able to do that because it is the foundation of magic."

She produced a mana sphere in her hand and made it rotate.

"That may only work because it's a familiar action. Given the structure of this world, my thoughts may be the strongest."

"I wonder if what happened on the beach was due to my subconscious thoughts. I was not controlling my fear or anxiety."

"Perhaps. If so, it would show a bit of the possibilities and limits of this world."

At that point, another voice cut in.

"Hey."

They turned toward the slightly silly-sounding voice and found Kita Yoshie walking up the path.

"Kita-san?"

"Yoshie?"

They both spoke in surprise and stared at the girl's face.

This was definitely Yoshie.

"I see you're suspicious."

"Of course we are. After all-..."

Yoshie cut Junko off and began speaking herself.

"No, I understand. It's not surprising. I can't say anything for sure as I only just got here, but based on the events or phenomena I've seen here..."

She used her usual roundabout manner of speech and this time Akuto cut her off with a bitter smile.

"In short, this place grants the wishes of the dead?"

Yoshie grinned and nodded.

"So you caught on. I guess I should've expected it of you."

Junko shook her head in confusion as she watched them.

"I already heard about that, but then isn't it odd for you to be here, Kita-san? After all, it means you might only be here because he or I wished for it."

Her expression was perfectly serious and it was true they could not say

for sure this was the real Yoshie if that were the case.

However, Yoshie replied without hesitating.

"That's definitely a possibility. But is it a problem even if that's what happened?"

"Eh? Are you saying it is not a problem?"

Yoshie's comment had caught Junko by surprise.

"I have memories of being here before running across you two. Of course, you could say those memories were created just now, but those memories more or less guarantee we can live here just fine as long as we don't think about it too much."

She sounded confident.

"Is it...really okay?"

Junko was still concerned, but Yoshie further assured her.

"Our words can reach others and we have differences in opinion. I can sense our individual personalities here. If you know me, you'd know I had my doubts and investigated. However, it's impossible to prove the existence of others, so I decided to just not think about it." She pointed toward the city. "Look, the city is up and running. That happened while we weren't looking. If nothing else, life is back to normal."

Akuto sensed something odd about that statement and raised his eyebrow.

"If nothing else?"

Yoshie shrugged as if hesitant to speak.

"There are of course a lot of differences. It would be best to hear about it from the student council president. It would get complicated if I explained it."

Yoshie then began walking toward the academy.

"Are we going to school?" asked Junko nostalgically.

"That's right. It's just easier to live there."

It appeared to be class time. No students could be seen outside, but a look in the windows showed students filling the classrooms.

"It's just like it used to be," commented Akuto.

"Yeah, but something you'll find strange is waiting here."

With that comment that hinted at something to come, Yoshie called up the student council president with a student handbook. She then took

Akuto and Junko to the student council room.

The school building's layout had not changed, so there was no real need for her to show the way. Lily had called for them during class time and she seemed to have predicted this.

"I thought you might be interested in this," she said sarcastically with no change of expression.

She showed them a mana screen on the desk containing data supplied by the "gods".

"You might be wondering about the lack of a greeting, but it doesn't feel like any time has passed. It hardly seems strange to have you two in here."

Lily suggested they take a seat.

"It's a moving reunion for me," said Akuto seriously.

Lily gave a cruel smile.

"Stop that, world destroyer."

She once more urged them to look at the data on the mana screen.

"This is the world before I was judged to be the demon king,"

concluded Akuto after glancing through the list.

"I hate how good at that you are," complained Lily. "But it does help since I hadn't memorized all the statistical data. Let's go as far back as it will let us."

She sent the years of the statistics in reverse and Akuto nodded as he watched it.

"Yes, it's the same as the data I remember. Return the time to the present. A birth certificate should come in in a few more minutes. If it does, it means we're repeating history."

"Does that mean this world of the afterlife is recreating the world from about two years before we died?" asked Junko.

Lily shook her head.

"It's similar, but I don't think it's the same. As you may have noticed, there are no L'Isle-Adams here."

"Really?"

Junko sounded surprised.

"Really. Arnoul is the only student council officer missing. Korone and the manual labor L'Isle-Adams are missing as well. Humans are working to maintain their lifestyle and..."



"Keena," cut in Akuto.

"Yes. Keena alone is missing."

"Are those two points the only changes?" asked Junko.

"The empress is Kazuko and there is no record of the black magicians being oppressed. If we're going to describe the situation without getting overly conceptual..."

"Yes?"

"We're at peace. It's enough to leave me bored out of my mind. There's no uprising by the black magicians, Zero isn't ruling over us all via the gods and the L'Isle-Adams, there's no record of the Republic even existing, and there's no sign of any foreign countries resisting the empire."

Lily folded her arms and rested her elbows on her desk.

"And that's why you aren't seen as unusual, Akuto-kun. You aren't a demon king."

"Really?" he asked back.

She nodded.

"Does that make you happy? You may have your doubts, but the demon king is said to be dead and he hasn't been resurrected. There aren't even rumors about it. It's almost disappointing."

Akuto's expression made it clear he did not know how to take that.

"Th-this is not a bad thing," muttered Junko in confusion. "No, it really is not. Good, good."

However, she did not appear to have accepted it and she was watching Akuto's expression.

"Is the timeline different here? Or is this merely the world someone wished for? Also, we have our memories of the past, but do the other people not?"

He was doubtful.

"This gets tricky if we start talking about time."

Yoshie started to speak, but Lily stopped her.

"That would just confuse the issue, so please stop. The only people who have their memories are those close to you who knew the truth."

"Oh, right. I know you don't want me talking about time, but there's something I have to say and I'll do it quickly. Traveling through time was a future technology that only Yamato Bouhichirou could use. You remember, don't you?" asked Yoshie.

"I do, but the device I used was-..."

"A completely different technology. I know. But there's another fact here that may actually be completely natural: Brave – that is, Hiroshi – is not here and he's the one who would have inherited the time traveling device."

Lily looked back at the screen displaying statistical data.

"The name Miwa Hiroshi is in here, so he is here. He just hasn't shown himself yet."

"Keena wasn't a part of this world from the beginning, but Hiroshi was? Then where is he?"

Akuto asked those questions to no one in particular.

Hiroshi was in the forest outside the city and he was facing a man he would never forget.

"Yamato Bouichirou."

His journey there after dying was the same as Junko and the others, but he alone had travelled along a different path. He had entered the forest as if being guided and he had all of a sudden found Bouichirou sitting on a tree stump. He himself did not know if this was destiny or if he had wished for it.

Even so, he felt this was a starting point toward what he needed to do.

He had to ask Bouichirou several questions. Countless questions had been left unanswered by the man's death.

"I met the people from your team," said Hiroshi sarcastically.

"From that tone, I take it you did not enjoy the experience. They could be a rough bunch."

Bouichirou treated Hiroshi like an old friend and laughed. He seemed gentler than before and, when combined with his beautiful features, it surrounded him with an aura that charmed any who spoke with him.

Hiroshi had intended to complain, but that aura slowed him down.

"I was nearly killed countless times. Was that on your orders?"

"Of course not. I had realized it to a certain extent, but they lacked the same virtues I possess. All I can offer you is an apology, though."

"I don't need your apology. Did they die and come here too? If so, I have something else to complain about."

"Who can say? But it sounds like they would be unable to look me in the eye now."

Bouichirou smiled.

"They wouldn't be able to look anyone in the eye. They caused a mass immigration to this world by following your ambitions...or maybe not exactly your ambitions. It may have been a misunderstanding or an intentional distortion of what you wanted."

Hiroshi left his wording vague, but it seemed to get through to Bouichirou.

"Yes, I thought it might come to that. And I gave up because I thought that might be an acceptable alternative."

"Don't act like you understood everything."

"Fine. I was not trying to speak badly of those who died, but I did try to prevent that destruction."

Bouichirou's tone of voice increased the discomfort within Hiroshi.

"What are you trying to say?" he asked harshly.

"How about we explain this in chronological order? You know I tried to change history, correct?"

The man gave a self-deprecating smile.

"Yes, I do."

"That was because I saw the world's final great demon king awaken and I saw the extra-universal gods arrive to destroy the world."

"I know that too. To avoid that, you said the demon king and the Law of Identity had to exchange vows, right? I didn't really get what you meant, though."

"Yes, but I never accomplished it."

Hiroshi nodded as he thought back on his memories.

"I understand that much. To be saved by the Law of Identity, Zero and the machine gods tried to turn mankind into data just like them and then send them to another dimension. That way it would not matter if mankind was destroyed. And it was aniki – the current demon king – who gave us some extra time."

"Yes. And as a result, the future changed from the one I knew."

"Are you saying that was a mistake?" asked Hiroshi.

Bouichirou shrugged.

"It's hard to say whether it was or not. This world of the afterlife is that extra time. This here is the extra time that the demon king gave to mankind. It is not over yet."

"It isn't over yet?"

Hiroshi tilted his head.

"However, this place may be the end. Having no end may be the end. In other words, time may flow for all eternity here."

Bouichirou's words made Hiroshi sigh.

"Could you maybe phrase things in an understandable way?"

"Sorry. I've always been like this and I can't seem to stop. The future may have changed from the one I knew, but you could say the conclusion was exactly as I predicted. I know what happened in the history you experienced. I negotiated with the thought entity named The One in order to reach an agreement with the extra-universal gods. They too wanted a world they could live in without fear of an inter-universal invasion."

Hiroshi worked to understand. Once he broke it down into individual elements, he found he could grasp the meaning.

"But The One betrayed you."

"Yes, and the Republic attacked the empire despite having been so calm. They appear to be unrelated events, but if you view them on the backdrop of an invasion from outside the universe, most everything can be predicted and linked together. The devices left behind by the early magical civilization, the black magicians' plan, and the Formless Power were all prepared to face that invasion. The fact that the invasion was a

success means the future ultimately could not be changed."

"When you put it that way, I can sort of understand," said Hiroshi. "But if this place is our 'extra time', don't we still have a chance?"

"Still have a chance? What do you mean by that?"

It was now Bouichirou's turn to ask a question.

"A chance to change the past. It seems simple to me. We stop the internal conflict and the elimination of the magical civilization and instead advance a plan to win the war against the extra universal gods."

Hiroshi sounded confident and he pointed at the bracelet that was the Brave suit.

"I can travel through time with this, right? Is it still possible even after dying?"

"You sure are hasty. In the end, do you want to save mankind?"

Bouichirou's eyes opened in surprise.

"I don't know, but I sense something like destiny here." Hiroshi grinned. "At the very least, the demon king can't save mankind, right?"

"If that is what you wish, then fine." Bouichirou shook his head. "But

changing the future is difficult."

"Is it really? You said you died and the future changed. In that case, simply changing it can't be that hard."

"No, it did not change. In the end, you all came here."

He pointed toward the ground with a cynical expression.

"Here?"

"The afterlife."

"Having all these different worlds is confusing. The real world, virtual alternate dimensions, outside the universe, non-virtual alternate dimensions, and the afterlife. Does that cover it?"

Hiroshi frowned and Bouichirou corrected him.

"Not quite. What you referred to as 'outside the universe' and 'non-virtual alternate dimensions' are the same thing. Not much is known about those alternate dimensions. We only know there are likely an infinite number. You had the rest right and the Law of Identity is related to them all. Most likely, she created them. That is why they are relatively easy to understand."

"Keena-chan created them and so we can understand them?"

"To me, she was Sudou Rimu. When I say we can understand them, I mean those worlds can be simply described. You merely need to understand that our universe was created by the Law of Identity."

"Can you really be so sure? And weren't we talking about traveling through time to change history?" complained Hiroshi.

He was losing track of what he wanted from the conversation and Bouichirou laughed when he noticed.

"If you are to travel through time, I want you to understand that our knowledge and our world contradict each other."

"Is it just me or are you straying from the point again?"

"I am not. According to our knowledge, what is time?"

It was an abstract question, but Hiroshi realized it had taken a step toward the core of the issue. To redo the world and avoid that conclusion, he had to understand what time was.

As a student, he had a certain level of education about the physical concept of time, so he gave the textbook answer.

"Time is relative and it can be compared to the space in which an object moves. The higher the speed, the larger the space the object can move through and the more possible phenomena it can encounter, but the object can only move in one direction. In two-dimensional terms, it is like only being able to choose one point on the circumference of an

expanding ripple in the water.”

“That is more or less it. A single object cannot exist in multiple places simultaneously, but that rule falls apart here. That is why I was able to travel back in time.”

Bouichirou picked up a branch and drew a line on the ground.

“An object cannot exist in multiple places simultaneously because time actually has a smallest unit. If time – that is, the space you compared it to – can be infinitely divided, the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise can be achieved.”

He made a mark at the center of the line and then another mark at the center of the newly divided line’s right half. Once he had divided it 32 times, the width of the marks was greater than the width of the line portion.

“If these marks represent matter’s smallest unit, this is how it works.”

“I understand that, but how does that relate to being able to travel back in time? In fact, this understanding of time means you can’t transcend it.”

“Exactly. In the water ripple model, the other points on the circumference are nothing but possibilities. In other words, they are what could have happened but did not happen. Even if a single piece of matter returns to the previous point, the rest of the matter is no longer there. However, the world we are so familiar with did not function under the

water ripple model.”

He used his foot to erase the line and drew a different line.

“This world is constructed in a way impossible under the laws of theoretical physics. You could say this world is like a recording on a single tape or like a chapter of text. It has linearity.”

He drew multiple squares on the line and the number of squares increased the further right he reached.

“All matter exists simultaneously in these squares and the past remains as the past. You can view the past as a pile of blocks that continues to grow larger. In that case, it is possible to rearrange the blocks.”

“And that’s why it should be possible to rewrite history and change the future,” agreed Hiroshi.

“Yes. Changing it is possible,” replied Bouichirou.

“Then tell me how to use the suit.”

Hiroshi pointed toward the Brave suit glowing on his wrist.

“I will of course do so, but as I said in the beginning, I must warn you that this is useless.”

Bouichirou gave a troubled frown.

"You keep saying that, but why is it useless if it's possible to change history?"

"As I said before, you will ultimately come here for some reason."

He pointed toward the ground.

"In other words, to the afterlife?"

Hiroshi frowned, but Bouichirou's expression remained unchanged.

"Yes. And you will likely return to this spot and this instant countless times."

Chapter 2: Eternal Happiness

"Okay, it's time for class," lazily said Torii Mitsuko, a teacher. "Isn't it great that nothing really happened even though that meteor hit?"

She laughed and the students laughed loudly along with her.

"That demon king sure summoned something terrible."

"And Brave died keeping it from doing too much damage, right?"

The classroom filled with various voices.

"But when I saw the meteor hit, I thought I was dead for sure," carelessly said Mitsuko. "I don't know when exactly everything recovered, though."

It seemed everything was as it was a few days after Akuto had transferred in.

Akuto and Junko had started attending classes partway through, but Mitsuko-sensei's attitude and the curious looks turned Akuto's way told them what everyone thought had happened.

It seemed a lot of them were not aware they had died. Some things likely felt out of place to them, but the world had not changed and there was no threat of war. Their lives were no different than when they had been alive, so there may not have been any point in realizing they were dead.

More importantly, Akuto was completely surprised by how his classmates treated him. His magical skill had not weakened any, but they did not fear him as the demon king.

The magical classes and standard classes were easy for him. The looks of envy his classmates gave him were nice, but that was nothing compared to how wonderful it felt to be treated like a human.

"That transfer student is amazing."

"I can see why the class rep has fallen for him. Aren't you his fiancée? Way to go."

"H-hey! Stop that!"

Junko blushed and argued back, but when she hid her face in embarrassment, she did so in the shirt on Akuto's chest. Their experiences together that went beyond mere battlefields seemed to have added to her love for Akuto because she had begun honestly expressing her feelings for him. This was of course not a bad thing for Akuto.

"Maybe we should get a little more used to being together," he said with a smile.

When their classmates whistled with no intention of making fun, he could only shrug with a satisfied expression.

"How could I ever get used to being with someone as dangerous as you?" spat back Junko to hide her embarrassment.

The others gasped and backed away.

Once class ended, Etou Fujiko ran in with frightening speed and leaped toward Akuto because she had heard what had happened.

"Akuto-samaaaa! I missed yooooouuuu!"

Fujiko was usually graceful, so this great energy sent a stir through the students. To her, this was a reunion after much hardship and thus crying or weeping would only be natural, but it looked like a sudden madness to the students.

"W-wait, Fujiko-san."

Akuto grew flustered and she seemed to regain some of her calm. She adjusted her disheveled uniform and cleared her throat toward the surrounding students.

"Ahem. I apologize. You see, Akuto-sama is my childhood friend. We were neighbors and we would often move between each other's second story windows."

The secret wink she gave Akuto made it clear she was making this up on the spot.

—This is just like when Keena reverted the world before.

He now accepted the truth of Lily's words. Those deeply involved in the situation had not lost their memories and the others had their memories missing or altered. Also, Fujiko had arrived in this world ahead of him and she had noticed the difference in what the people who came later said.

"Um, Fujiko-san?"

"Oh, come on, Akuto-sama. ...Oh, I use '-sama' because he is the man who should lead this empire. When we were together, he would refer to me as his sister and I would simply call him Akuto."



Fujiko raised her voice so the surrounding people could hear, but this was the first Akuto had heard of this too. Both boys and girls let out cries and they could not hide their jealousy toward Akuto.

“W-wait. Stop clinging to him like that! Eto-san!”

Junko charged out of the crowd and it was obvious the situation was about to grow even more complicated, but Fujiko calmly wrapped her arm around Akuto's and spoke in an obviously teasing tone of voice.

"Oh, Hattori-san...no, Junko-chan. You need to try to get along. After all, polygamy is normal in this world. Akuto-sama can have four or five wives without issue!"

"Give it a rest, Etou-san."

Junko frowned in displeasure and brought a hand to the wooden sword at her waist, but she froze in place when she noticed her classmates' reaction.

"I had a feeling that would happen."

"I don't like it, but I could see Sai marrying both Etou-san and the class rep."

"Maybe I should be Sai-kun's wife too."

All of them were making similar comments.

"You have to be kidding me," said Junko blankly.

Akuto also turned toward Fujiko.

Fujiko embraced his head and whispered to him.

"It's true. Polygamy has been conveniently allowed for our sake. You only need to marry us and we will truly be husband and wives. Then we can live together with no one getting in our way."

Her sexual tone of voice told him just how long Fujiko had been waiting for this.

"Students are only allowed a proper and moral married life," cut in a sudden voice.

It belonged to Yoshie who had cut through the ring of students. She wore a lab coat over a suit, so it was obvious she had been in the middle of work. In her normal life, she was a genius who had graduated school early and already worked as a priest.

"Kita-san."

Akuto was thankful to her for slowing Fujiko down because he had no idea what Fujiko would have done otherwise, but Yoshie waved her hand.

" 'Kita-san'? Don't be so formal. We're about to get married, after all."

Yoshie gave a mischievous smile. The other day, she had said there were "a lot of differences", but she had been hiding that this was the largest one.

Hearing that, Akuto and Junko completely forgot it was safest to hide the fact that their memories differed from everyone else's.

"Married!?"

"Ha ha. Did you forget the date, Akuto-kun? You already have all the credits you need here, so hurry up and pass the exam so you can graduate. Any temple would be willing to take you. They've been trying to create a position for you since you aren't bound to any specific sect."

Yoshie quickly provided several new facts for Akuto.

He had difficulty handling all the new information, but he began to realize his former dream was being granted here. It still did not feel real, but he felt it would be easier to preserve this happiness by fulfilling the job he was being given here than doing anything from his previous experiences.

—This was my dream before transferring to this school and before being told I was a demon king.

An enrapturing possibility lay before him. He could help others, he had more than enough power to do so, and he had three girls who truly understood him and loved him. What more could he ask for?

"Is this really okay?" he said to no one in particular.

"Of course it is."

"It is."

Yoshie and Fujiko nodded with large smiles covering their faces.

Seeing that, Junko's stiff expression gradually loosened up.

"I-I am not sure what to say... Could you all stop this? It is kind of embarrassing."

She covered her face with her arms and began to tremble.

"Don't cry. You look like you only just now learned what happiness is," cruelly teased Yoshie.

"There's nothing I can really say," said Akuto with an embarrassed smile.

One of the surrounding classmates began clapping and the applause eventually spread out into the hallway. It sounded like a popular singer was on stage.

"Oh, right. My new home was just finished, so I came to invite you all."

Yoshie waved her raised thumb to say to head outside.

The crowd parted to form a path and they saw Akuto and the girls off

with a smile. If they had not been in school, they would have scattered flowers overhead.

The four of them passed through the human arch and arrived on the schoolyard. Yoshie walked toward a land car stopped behind the school and a group called out to them from a seldom-used passageway.

The group of male students did not wear their uniforms properly and they had eccentric hairstyles that seemed intended to threaten those around them.

—I guess it isn't all happiness.

Akuto looked toward the largest boy who appeared to be the leader.

All of them could only be described as delinquents and that large boy with the most brutal-looking face walked toward him.

"I don't like it. I just don't. People like us have nothing and then there's people like you who have everything."

Akuto recalled the name of this boy who had a deep voice.

—Takeshi. That takes me back.

On Fujiko's instructions, he had been the first one to pick a fight with Akuto when they had been alive.

Akuto turned to Fujiko, but she shook her head and whispered that he had nothing to do with her.

"I see. A fight, is it? Yeah, you want a fight. Now, how should I handle this?"

Akuto smiled from the bottom of his heart. He felt oddly relieved that someone was willing to oppose him even here. If everything went too well, it made him worry. However, this meant he would still experience conflict and not everything would go his way. That was certainly a part of being happy.

"Don't be ridiculous. We've seen a hell that a sheltered boy like you couldn't even imagine. You can't stand up to us in a neat and tidy way."

Takeshi did not seem to consider losing a possibility and a sadistic smile appeared on his face.

—Oh, he's hiding a special baton and an incantation gun. And the rest of them are planning to attack on his signal. Two have knives and the rest have bats or crowbars.

Akuto instantly saw through their intentions and what they hid underneath their clothes and he understood how skilled they were at magic. Knowing all that, he smiled toward Takeshi.

"I don't feel like getting into the details, but I suggest you stop this. You won't gain anything from this."

"Heh heh heh." Takeshi laughed while ignoring the warning and approaching with a swaying gait. "Oh, I'll gain from this. You'll be the one that loses something here."

Takeshi's followers laughed out loud and he threw a punch without warning.

It was a surprise attack, but Akuto dodged it simply by tilting his head.

"That's dangerous, you know?"

His complete lack of fear angered Takeshi.

"Looks like you're a fast little bastard."

He jerked his chin toward his followers and they formed a large circle around Akuto and the girls. They were planning to rush in all at once.

"Cowards," said Junko with a grimace.

The followers gave perverted grins when they saw Junko's attitude.

"Oh, oh. You're a cute one."

"Don't be scared. We don't hit girls. We just make sure they have a good time."

Their vulgar laughs changed the look on Junko's face. She looked on the verge of reaching for her real sword rather than the wooden one.

"Don't kill them." Akuto shook his head. "Leave it to me."

In her current state, Junko could defeat the entire group, but she might kill them while she was at it.

"But..." she mumbled.

"Don't worry. I have plenty of experience and I know defeating them would only leave a grudge. Which means..."

Takeshi seemed unable to resist as Akuto talked on and on.

"Shut the hell up!" he shouted with a swing of his right hand.

It was a large hook that would be easy to dodge.

But there was a trick to it. The punch was just for show and the real attack was the special baton hidden up his sleeve. If Akuto dodged the hook by tilting his head like before, the baton would hit him when it protruded from the sleeve.

Akuto caught on from the beginning, so he stepped forward, grabbed Takeshi's arm, lightly twisted, and tossed him into the air. Rather than tearing off the boy's arm, he threw his entire body through the air.

"Hyah?"

He let out a questioning cry as he flew. Flight techniques were some of the more difficult ones even for students of a magic school, so a delinquent who did not take his studies seriously could not use them when taken by surprise. Takeshi seemed to be swallowed up by the blue sky much like the beach ball in a dolphin show.

"Eh?"

The instant of surprise created a fatal opening in the followers.

Akuto instantly moved in front of them and lightly jabbed his fist into their solar plexuses. He had held back quite a bit, but they still collapsed from pain as he appeared in front of them.

In the end, all eight of them were rolling or groaning on the ground before Takeshi fell back down.

When Takeshi finally fell, Akuto grabbed the nape of his neck with one hand and flicked his forehead with his other index finger. Takeshi's head rotated halfway around on his thick neck and his harshly shaken brain ceased functioning for just an instant. In other words, he had passed out.

Akuto casually placed Takeshi next to the other delinquents and nodded in satisfaction.

"Not killing them is fine...but won't they still hold a grudge?" asked Junko in exasperation.

"They'll at least think twice about picking a fight with me again. And I have an idea about how to deal with this afterwards."

"What's that?"

"A religion...I guess. I just have to bring back a traditional one," he explained with extreme indifference. "They lack empathy for others and don't think about the consequences. I just have to give people like that something to live for. As long as they have that, this kind of person will blindly follow it. Those traditional religions existed for those who didn't think about anything and could not accept suffering as their own responsibility."

"Will that really work?"

Junko was taken aback by Akuto's attitude. She was still not used to how terribly cruel he could be.

"People blindly followed the current system, but now they should be able to believe in the existence of something closer to being a real god, right? After all, nothing makes sense unless we assume someone created this world of the afterlife. They just have to start studying theology."

He pulled out his student handbook and contacted Student Council President Lily.

<What? You want me to have my father create a new department in the church? And you want to be in charge of it?>

Lily's father was a high priest, so he had the authority. Based on the past data and the current governance, recreating a traditional religion would be easy.

Akuto nodded in satisfaction at finding a job for himself.

"I don't know what has happened to the concept of time here, but the education will take several years."

He spoke it like a prophecy. It was actually a prediction, but he knew he was not wrong in this.

"Several years? Won't you graduate before then?" asked Junko.

"Oh? Akuto-sama is already about to graduate. And once he does, our new life begins. We have a new home prepared, don't we?"

Fujiko turned toward Yoshie as if to urge her to speak.

"That's right. How about we get going?"

Yoshie began walking.

They boarded a train at the academy station and travelled two stations away. Yoshie entered a high-rise building not far from the center of the capital. The security on the ground floor was strict and the automatic door had a lock that only allowed those with a certain level of conduct to

enter. The building contained living spaces for only a select few.

"The sixtieth floor is our home. That's the very top floor," explained Yoshie as she pressed the elevator button.

Akuto looked around the ground floor and saw a shopping mall with quite a few tenants such as a boutique, a café, and a jewelry store. A single floor was quite large.

"The entire floor?"

"It doesn't stand out as much as a mansion and we don't have to worry about stairs in the living space. The yard is artificial, but it has fish tanks and flower beds. It would be a nice place for pets."

The button for the top floor was locked so only Akuto and the girls could press it. Yoshie took the lead and opened the door. It led to a modernistic space filled with straight lines which was what they were most used to as a living space.

"Our individual rooms and Akuto-kun's room are separate. Each room has its own closet and bathroom, so they have everything we need. There's of course a living room and there's a courtyard, large bath, and pool as well, so we can spend our time there. That just leaves..."

As Yoshie explained the different rooms, she gained a mischievous smile and placed her hand on the door to the final room.

"The bedroom."

It contained a luxurious rococo-style double bed with a canopy. Further in were a glass-walled shower room and a sauna. A mirror covered the ceiling and the indirect lighting caused everything to shine orange.

"What is...this?" muttered Junko while blushing.

"Not bad!" exclaimed Fujiko in a high-pitched and emotional voice. "This bedroom will belong to Akuto-sama and me, won't it!?"

But Yoshie immediately rejected that idea.

"We all share this room."

"We share it?"

"Yeah. We'll all use it."

"As in a foursome?"

"If that's what everyone is into. I would be...fine with it I suppose. Yeah, I'm up for it."

"I am not into that," replied Fujiko. "I must take Akuto-sama for myself."

"In that case, we can divide it up by time...or take turns."

As Fujiko and Yoshie began that questionable discussion, Junko cut in while completely flustered.

"H-hey! What are you talking about!?"

"You can't tell? We're trying to decide our policy on reproductive activities," answered Yoshie. "This isn't exactly a normal situation, so we need to come to an agreement ahead of time."

"Stop trying to act so pure," added Fujiko. "You want him to make love to you too, don't you?"

Both girls let out an irritated snort.

"B-but..."

Junko could not find anything to say, but she let out a shout when she noticed Akuto trying to sneak away.

"This is only happening because you are so worthless! We need to hold a proper marriage ceremony between all of us! Once we do that, I will not complain!"

That changed the look on Yoshie and Fujiko's faces. The neon pink aura surrounding them transformed into the rose-colored aura of a maiden.

"Marriage!"

"A wedding!"

"And the consummation thereof!"

"Call it a marriage ceremony!"

Spurred on by Junko, the girls headed for the living room without Akuto. Wondering what this sudden change meant, he followed, but he only found the three girls lying on the living room sofa together and watching a guide to nearby wedding halls on a mana screen. He simply could not understand what was going on, so he shrugged, returned to the bedroom, and closed the door.

That evening, a strange but (to Akuto) relaxing new life began.

During the day, he worked on his studies and on establishing the new religion he was tentatively calling the "Church of Purity". At night, he was taken care of by the three girls who returned home at about the same time as him.

Even if he already knew them quite well, living with them meant learning of the more unexpected sides of them.



Yoshie was more sociable than he had expected and she had a habit of clinging to Fujiko and Junko as well as him. She could also be selfish and do things on a whim. When she was lost in the research she performed on the computer installed in her room, she would not come out no matter who called for her. When Fujiko had jokingly tickled the back of

her neck to draw her attention, she had grown seriously angry.

Fujiko was just about what he had expected, but she also had a way of being too open with someone she trusted and it could reach the point of laziness. If she was in a good mood, she would do the cooking, laundry, cleaning, and other chores, but if she was not in the mood, she would leave it all to Junko. She would also leave snack bags and uneaten food sitting around. Not only that, she would grow angry and insist she was still planning to eat it if someone threw it away. Nevertheless, she wanted Akuto to be the perfect man and he was the type to live up to her expectations, so it was always Yoshie and Junko who got angry at her.

Junko was Junko, so her clean-freak side showed itself almost immediately. She would complain about doing all the housework herself, but she was the first to grow fed up with anything being untidy. She also could not relax unless she personally cleaned the areas they had hired people to handle, so she always ended up doing the cleaning and laundry before the hired service's next cycle had arrived. She hated eating out and she insisted on buying ingredients herself to ensure their food was nutritionally balanced. However, she did not like opening up to others, so she would always tear Fujiko and Yoshie away from Akuto when they clung to him and yet she would not take that place herself. On occasion, however, she would keep a set distance from him and breathe heavily while giving heated looks in his direction. She was something like an in-house stalker. Fujiko found this creepy and even tried to get the two of them to embrace, but she was always left sighing in exasperation when Junko would struggle and run away.

Despite the problems, Akuto enjoyed this life. After all, he could improve it by putting some effort into it. By helping Junko with the chores, he could increase his contact with her without her feeling uncomfortable, he gave Fujiko work to do beyond her studies which

added order into her daily life, and he held late-night conversations with Yoshie that the other girls could not keep up with in order to distance them from sexual topics.

Normally, all this activity would have drained a man of energy, but Akuto could manage it. This allowed the days to fly by peacefully.

Their wedding was a grand event. They had argued over which religion's style to use, so they had ultimately decided to do all of them.

They rented out an event hall and the three girls appeared in wedding dresses and backed by a live orchestra. The guests were limited to friends and family, but the guest seats were still completely filled. The beauty of the three brides was enough to take Akuto's breath away.

The most excitement naturally came at the kiss of their vows. Yoshie and Fujiko gave him a smooth kiss and an enthusiastic kiss respectively, but Junko seemed to have hesitated up to that very last moment.

"I-in front of all these people?" she asked.

Fujiko said it was only natural and even Akuto told her to she should have been prepared for this.

What ultimately allowed her to make up her mind was what Akuto said next.

"I know this is your first kiss, so don't you want it to be in the best possible place?"

After that, Junko closed her eyes and quietly accepted his lips.

They finished the ceremony that used traditional eastern wedding garb and the reception went well. By the time they left by car, the sun was setting. They had no honeymoon, but they all felt on top of the world once they arrived home that night.

They had everything they could want.

They had a never-ending supply of whatever money could buy.

Even the weather was nice.

Akuto even had the love and adventure that all the rich wanted but that could not be bought.

These were golden days.

They ate, drank, laughed, grew angry, and loved each other.

The nights were the most stimulating part for someone as young as Akuto.

The three girls took turns sharing the bed with him for a night. They had drawn lots and decided on the order of Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie.

On the first night, Junko hid her face behind her hands. They had been naked in a bed together once before, but that had been a bizarre situation in which they were forced to recreate the events of a novel in a virtual alternate dimension.

Akuto began by mentioning that.

"I poked at your flower petals with my finger, didn't I?"

Junko laughed and finally took her hands from her face.

After exchanging a glance and smiling, an awkward silence fell.

"Are we really doing this?" asked Junko.

"I want to," said Akuto.

With an embarrassed smile, he held her tightly in his arms.

From there, they were too preoccupied to speak. She lay below him, they tightly wrapped their arms and legs around each other, and they pressed their bodies together to the point that they could not see each other's faces. Akuto could do nothing but feel the wetness grow on their lower parts and he wondered if he needed to perform the actions he had seen in porn. However, Junko said nothing as the tips of their mucous membranes touched, so he began to lower his hips.

But then Junko squirmed and slid up the bed. He felt holding her head

would be too forceful, so he moved up along with her. When the tip touched Junko again, the slimy sensation sent a tingling down his spine.

She let out a quick, sharp breath and squirmed up the bed again. He followed once more and that wordless process repeated several times.

It finally came to an end when Junko's head struck the headboard.

"Ow..." she said as she came back to her senses.

Akuto laughed and she gave a bitter smile.

"I-it isn't that I'm unwilling," she said.

She let go of his body, spread out the shifted blanket and sheets, and returned to their original position. Akuto also crawled back to his original position.

They embraced each other again and Junko gave a quick shriek. Their lower parts touched and the coldness surprised Akuto as well.

"S-so this is what it feels like. I had never thought about it."

Their surprising wetness bewildered Junko and Akuto nodded in agreement.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

This time, she gave a small nod.

He lowered his hips and felt as if his entire body was being enveloped, but then he felt some resistance.

She let out a small moan and her arms and legs tightened around him.

He stopped moving, but she whispered to him.

"Keep going."

He wrapped his arms around her head, let her wrap her legs around his waist, and lowered his body down.

Junko arched her back as if showing him her throat.

The theory behind time travel was one thing, but actually doing it was not difficult. Once the Brave suit's mode was changed, he only needed to enter a number and a place and he would be taken there.

However, that proved this time travel had been used many times already and that meant it was highly likely Bouichirou was telling the truth.

<You will likely return to this spot and this instant countless times.>

—His methods were the problem.

As his first target, Hiroshi chose the laboratory Fujiko had found. That was the birthplace of the modern mana civilization. With all the documents they had, determining the date was easy. It also told him what documents and data he could destroy to prevent the research from advancing. Mana research had found it difficult to receive funding back then, so they could not afford even a small delay.

He entered the laboratory while still wearing the Brave suit. It had a security guard, but he had not been armed with a gun. Hiroshi knocked out the guard with a laser set to the lowest power setting.

He searched for the documents and the computer with the corresponding data on it. In this age, data was always printed out and filed, so his only option was to burn down the entire room.

There was nothing explosive in the room, so piling up the computers and documents and setting the latter alight was the most efficient method.

Hiroshi stacked up the documents and roughly placed the computers on top. He destroyed the fire alarm sensors with his monomolecular cutter before using a laser to set fire to the documents, melt the plastic computer cases, and ensure the fire was spreading.

It turned out he had to burn the remaining three rooms as well, but someone must have noticed the fire and reported it because policemen with weapons arrived while he was working on the final room.

—Is it possible I'll have to kill them?

He was worried, but it turned out to be a needless fear. The police were only armed with revolvers using physical bullets, so he easily handled them. He could not use a mana screen, but he set the lasers to auto and had them vaporize the bullets.

This frightened the police and they fortunately did not resist any further.

—I don't want to go so far as to kill them.

But then another thought came to him.

—Wasn't I supposed to be saving mankind?

That made him shudder.

His actions here were a crime even by his own standards. He was opposing the police and burning documents and computers. He felt these actions were not as far removed from murder as he would like to think.

—Bouichirou probably went as far as murder.

Sacrificing a minority would save the majority. It was a simple calculation.

However, that was a decision that was never approved of in a story.

It was possible this world was someone's story. Even so...no, for that very reason, the decision made with a simple calculation could not be approved of. That was how ethics worked. The world was filled with stories of people weighing their lover against all mankind and choosing to save their lover, but that was originally not something that should be allowed to spread.

But because the people had accepted that story, what he was doing would never be accepted by them.

Guilt brought a chill to his spine and his feeling of isolation accelerated it.

He completed his work as the police watched on and he immediately had the Brave suit return him to his original location.

"I have to give you up for a whole two days in a row!"

Fujiko clung to Akuto while speaking as if it were torture.

"Can't you think of it as 'only two days'?"

"No, it is a whole two days," she complained.

She lay on the bed wearing the black lingerie she had prepared for this day and she spread her arms toward him with sparkles in her eyes.

She acted like someone who was perfectly accustomed to it all, but he knew she had grilled Junko after her turn.

"What did it feel like when he made love to you?" she had asked.

"His you-know-what had to have been pretty formidable," Yoshie had added.

"How long did the pain last? ...No, this is not about my experience. I am only asking because Akuto-sama's is special."

Junko had of course not been able to answer them and their questioning had eventually become something akin to torture.

And if Fujiko had done that, she was clearly not as experienced as she pretended to be.

However, that did not mean Akuto could relax. When he had done it with Junko, both of them had been too overwhelmed to do anything extra and they had not even considered it, but this time was different. He was worried about putting too much of an unnecessary burden on Fujiko.

His hands crept along her body as they embraced and he spoke up unexpectedly.

"There are a surprising number of differences between different people's bodies."

"What?" protested Fujiko. "P-please do not mention other girls right now!"

"S-sorry. I just felt you...um...have a much more feminine body."

Fujiko had a unique softness to her that made him feel like he could sink down into it forever. This contrasted the resilience of Junko's body that seemed to press back out from within. He decided he needed to use different methods when touching their bodies.

He was unsure if his comment had been effective or if he should have kept his mouth shut, but Fujiko did not resist any further.

He leaned his body weight on her large body and his upper body was enveloped by the sensation of plunging into water and being covered in lukewarm oil.

He touched every part of Fujiko's body and his touches were more of a groping than a caress. He focused on the parts of her that produced lovely cries from her and she soon brought her hands to his body.

Her fingers traced from his side to his hips. She extremely awkwardly held his lower part in her hand and moved it in order to guide it to its rightful place. After he adjusted his body's position and lowered his hips, he felt a strange new sensation as if his entire body were tightly enveloped by mucous membranes.

The two of them trembled in ecstasy, but it was Fujiko who began moving first.

With a suggestive smile, she thrust up from below.

He had supposedly eliminated the source of the mana civilization, but the past had not changed.

No, it technically had changed.

"The origin of the mana civilization changed?" asked Hiroshi.

"It is not that the laboratory's data was salvaged," answered Bouichirou. "A researcher who was off duty received some data by email and managed to use that to develop mana on his own. That is now the moving tale told in history books."

Bouichirou gave a thin smile. It looked like a devilish smile yet it also looked kind. Either way, the smile showed he had known this would happen.

That enraged Hiroshi.

"The security should have made it impossible for that researcher to receive the data by email!"

Bouichirou shrugged.

"Yes. I am well aware of that. But no one has any way of knowing that now. That's how history works."

"Do you really have to act like the story was fabricated?"

"But it was fabricated. It really was."

"Really?"

That unexpected statement caused Hiroshi's eyes to open wide.

"Yes. Only those involved can truly know history. We were not there, so all we can know is the historical information that someone could have forcibly rewritten."

"That means anything could be made into the truth!" shouted Hiroshi.

"There is no such thing as truth. At least, there isn't if this world really is a story."

"Then does relate to the theory of time you explained to me before?"

"Yes. If you change something, something else is inserted at an appropriate point somewhere else. It is changed by someone."

It was hard to believe, but Bouichirou had no reason to lie as Hiroshi would be able to confirm for himself whether it was true or not.

If that "someone" was the Law of Identity, she was being quite cruel. If her intent was to prevent the world from being changed, she would be sending the world toward destruction. If her intent was to prevent the world from being destroyed, it would be best for her to support Hiroshi's attempts.

While thinking on that, Hiroshi felt a dark emotion welling up within him.

If he killed someone or changed history in an important and definitive way, it was possible not even the Law of Identity could prevent it. He was reluctant to kill, but it would not be a problem if this truly was the afterlife. (He had no proof it was, though.) He would only be changing the timing in which that person arrived and it made murder feel less definitive. Also, if he could end it all with a single sacrifice...

"By the way, did you ever succeed in killing an important individual?" asked Hiroshi as a challenge.

Bouichirou understood what he meant and gave a strange smile.

However, the two of them did not exchange any more words.

When Yoshie's turn came, she had to have been quite nervous, but it seemed her curiosity won out.

She stared intently at and touched Akuto's body. She especially enjoyed the way that one specific part of him reacted.

"I already had all the knowledge, but seeing it in person really is different."

She was wrapped in a blanket with only her hands and head sticking out while Akuto sat naked on the bed and she toyed with the front of his body.

"Do you really have to toy with it like that?" complained Akuto.

"But I have to know all about it," she calmly answered.

Hearing that, he could not help but grow a bit mean.

"In that case, we should both get to know all about each other."

He reached around to her back and pulled away the blanket.

"Hyah."

With her white skin exposed, she squirmed and tried to hide herself, but he pulled the blanket around himself such that it pulled her forward to embrace him.

"I expected you to be the type who wouldn't get embarrassed when she's naked."

"Of course I'm going to be embarrassed given the situation. ...Try to be more sensitive."

She blushed, but he did not hold back. He placed the blanket over both of their heads and held down her legs.

"I already had all the knowledge, but seeing it in person really is different."

He repeated her line as he placed his hand on her corresponding body part.

"Fine, I'm sorry for saying that."

She squirmed, but she could not hope to match his strength.

"All I'm doing is rubbing between your toes."

"Are you going to claim that's between my two big toes?"

"It's an old joke, I know. But I'm surprised how ready you are down here."

He laughed and embraced her face-to-face.

"You're just plain mean," she said.

"Mean? I've been called pure evil."

Without giving her time to prepare, he lowered his body down.

She let out a wordless cry that was a mixture of surprise and a different feeling.

Hiroshi shot down the black magician woman who was fleeing with a baby named Akuto.

After making sure Akuto was dead, he averted his gaze from the corpse of the infant that had been crushed by the fall.

Chapter 3: Many Possibilities that are Currently Absent

The days flowed by.

It was unclear what meaning the passage of time held in the afterlife, but the seasons changed and they counted the passage of five years.

Akuto and the others had supposedly grown older, but they remained the same as before. Akuto may have already transcended the concept of aging, but the others also did not age or grow as time went on.

All the students graduated from Constant Magic Academy and it shut down, but the facility continued on as a community center. The teachers either remained to work there or began working in other public positions.

The city expanded and people's relationships somewhat changed. Even so, the people making up the city remained the same because no one aged or died.

More importantly, no way of leaving the world presented itself.

"I do not think it is good for my condition the following day. But...um...it is not that I do not like it."

Junko spoke to Akuto in bed.

He had made love to the three girls countless times since the first time, but it did not remain fresh and surprising forever. For about a year, he had remained active every night. The three girls had two day gaps

between their turns, so their desire had never waned. But by the second year, they had begun spending more nights speaking calmly.

"Has your condition ever been a problem?" asked Akuto. "Oh, but I'm just asking out of curiosity. It isn't like I'm dead set on doing it tonight or anything."

He and Junko exchanged a glance.

"Well, no. I suppose it has not," she answered after some thought. "I do gain weight, though."

"Some people think of who they are tomorrow as a different person from who they are today."

"Yes, that is true. Are you asking why that change does not occur here?"

"Yes. I know that some percentage of our cells is replaced by the following day, but I don't know if that happens here. Still, our relationship has progressed...and changed a little."

He leaned over and kissed Junko. After intertwining their tongues for a bit, they moved their faces apart once more.

"I said we aren't doing it tonight," said Junko while narrowing her eyes.

"You've gotten a lot less shy. That's fine by me of course, but you wouldn't even let me kiss you until we came here."

Junko's expression stiffened.

"You are not going to say you do not like me anymore, are you?"

"Sorry if I worried you. Try to remember that falling even further in love is also a change in one's feelings. At any rate, our bodies stay the same while our feelings alone change."

His expression was perfectly serious and Junko nodded.

"That is true, but why are you mentioning this?"

"I've gradually become more and more interested in what this world really is."

"Stop that."

She gave a nervous look, but it appeared to be a forced expression meant to be shown to Akuto.

He realized that and shook his head.

"I understand, but I'm scared too."

"Scared?"

"I think happiness is what we have here. We have worthwhile work, people accept us, we love, and we are loved."

"My feelings are not going to change," Junko quickly assured him.

"I know that. That isn't what I meant."

"Are you afraid of having this happiness continue?"

"That isn't it either. I'm afraid of eternity. We will no longer die and our feelings will not change. In other words, everything is already over for us."

He bit his lip as if finding this difficult to say.

"Over?"

"If we continue like this, it won't create anything new. I'm trying to rehabilitate the delinquents, but I'm using an old method and their actions fall within my imagination to a disturbing degree. In other words, there's almost nothing left for me to do."

"But you said your work is worthwhile."

"I did, but it's very simple work for me. I don't grow tired of it, but none of it is new to me."

"But what do you mean it is over for us? Are you actually afraid of not

dying?"

"Sort of. Hypothetically...well, we might actually have it for real. Anyway, if you had eternal life, what would you do?"

Junko tilted her head at that.

"I never thought about it, but it would certainly be boring. Is that what you mean?"

"It's similar to boredom, but not quite," began Akuto as if a dam had broken. "I've been thinking about it for a long time because of the power I gained. I wondered if I was afraid of eternal life because of the boredom, but that isn't it. What I'm afraid of is being forced to continue when everything is already over for me. I'd be forced to continue talking despite having nothing left to talk about. I'd be forced to continue writing despite having nothing left to write about. The delinquent rehabilitation is the same. They'll eventually start talking the way I taught them to, but that's nothing more than being an echo of me. Even romance is similar. We become one and thus become inseparable. That is an ending and yet we must continue on afterwards."

"You want to know why you should continue? If our lives continue, why not take it easy and do so? What else can we do? Akuto, you are acting weird."

She held his hand worriedly and he looked her in the eye.

"If we are the characters of a story, we've already reached the ending. If

we want to do anything else – even live a peaceful life – we have to do something. We must search for the reason we must do something. We must search for that truth.”

“But why must we do that? No! For whose sake must we do that?”

Anger had almost completely filled her voice, but Akuto still nodded calmly.

“That is something else we have to search out.”

She said nothing more as if she had given up.

Junko had already left by the time he woke up the next morning. He entered the living room and found that Yoshie was gone and that Fujiko alone lay lazily on the sofa.

“It sounded like you really went at it last night,” she said sarcastically.

“Stop that. Besides, you’re always a lot more-...”

She cut him off with a serious comment.

“I know. What were you arguing about?”

He sat next to her and explained the situation and she used the chance to rest her head on him.

"Are you still worried about saving the world?"

"To be honest, my focus on that has faded. I was on the verge of forgetting about Keena, Korone, and Hiroshi."

He brushed his fingers through her hair and she skillfully adjusted her head's position to let him.

"That just shows how happy you are."

"Even my memories are fading. It's like we're stuck here in eternity."

"Do you have a problem with eternity?"

"I think I do. While living in eternity, we need to find the meaning behind that eternity and bring this ending...to an end."

"That's a bit confusing, but I suppose so. Now, how about we get started?"

"Get started with what?"

"First, we can determine whether this is a dream or reality by touching each other's bodies."

Her hand reached around his waist.

"Those actions may be part of what has caused my memories to fade."

He stood up and told her to leave the house.

Puzzled, she followed him and he climbed to the apartment building's roof. They could see the entire city from there.

"Is there a reason to look at the city?" she asked.

"No." He shook his head. "But I wanted to see into the distance. As far into the distance as I can."

He produced a mana screen that displayed exactly what he himself could see.

"Your skill in magic certainly hasn't waned."

"I want to stay at the top of my game. Anyway, my vision is infinite so long as mana exists."

"But when we were alive, there was no mana outside imperial territory. Plus, the earth was round, so you could see no better than a telescope on the surface and no better than a normal person in space."

Akuto nodded in agreement with Fujiko's explanation and pointed into the distance.

"But this world is completely filled with mana. The mana never ends."

He extended his vision into the distance much like a camera zooming in. Fujiko could see the corresponding change on the screen.

"Eh? This is quite impressive."

Her eyes opened wide as the zooming footage left the city, passed the horizon beyond it, and continued even further. Travelling past the horizon meant it reached the sky.

The sky expanded until it filled the screen and his vision showed nothing but the color blue. When he finally passed through the clouds, the screen turned white for an instant and then the darkness quickly grew. His vision reached space and ultimately vanished.

"It vanished?"

The instant after Fujiko said that, his vision filled with darkness once more and the previous series of scenes appeared in reverse. The earth expanded on the screen and it finally grew blue. And...

"Our backs!"

Sure enough, the screen displayed Akuto and Fujiko's backs. She thought about what that meant if it really was equivalent to what Akuto could see.

"This is us right now?"

She waved her right hand and the Fujiko in the image did the same.

"Yes. This is what I'm seeing right now. I noticed this a while back."

He moved his left arm.

"And what does it mean?" she asked.

"If the world we lived in was fictional, then the afterlife is also fictional. I started to think about what differentiated the two worlds and the answer I found was the presence or absence of an external wall," he explained. "The world of the living had an external wall, but this world does not. No matter which three-dimensional direction you move in, you will return to your starting point. You can continue forever, but the space is finite."

"I understand the concept, but what does it mean?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "But I can say a few things with no real proof. They may both be fictional, but there is a fiction with something outside and there is a fiction with only the inside. And in the latter case, some are the protagonists and some are the background characters. I think whatever we do will be successful...while in this world at least."

He gave a mischievous sidelong glance toward Fujiko.

She blushed and gave a small bitter smile with the corners of her mouth.

"So you realized I was still thinking of ruling the world."

"We're a better pair than anyone else realizes," he said. "Even if the others haven't caught on, I know what you're up to. You've approached within a step away from constructing a governmental structure with me at the center, haven't you?"

"I have. How about it? Will you sit on the throne or will you let it end with nothing more than a wealthy life? You can do whatever you want."

"And you know I won't do either. This is just an elaborate prank. You find it more fun when a fortune built up to be squandered is destroyed in some exciting way."

He smiled.

"Oh, dear. I'm happy you understand everything, but it's still disappointing that you knew what I was planning."

She smiled as well.

"I'm going to go a step beyond that. How about I crush this world in my grasp?"

"Eh?"

He had spoken so casually that it caught Fujiko off guard.

"This is a finite world and it's filled with mana. Those are the rules, and that means..."

He stretched out his hand and bent his fingers as if training his grip.

The world began to creak.

"Ahh," cried Fujiko in surprise.

The city shook, the air vibrated, and the pressure caused everything to groan.

The earth also shook. The earth would not normally be filled with mana, but this finite space was entirely filled with mana and thus the earth itself was made of mana.

Akuto essentially held that finite space in his grasp.

Fujiko realized he was crushing the very world into a smaller size.

"Akuto-sama..."

She quietly called his name in fear.

This was no different from suicide.

This was a world where they did not die and could not die, but would everything return to nothingness if he crushed that very world? His expression made it clear he had already resolved himself to answering that question.



His expression was calm as he quietly clenched his fist.

Seeing that, Fujiko simply took his other hand in her own.

The earth ripped up as if gathering in the center of the space, the ocean approached the city as it raged like a tsunami, the buildings cracked, and the people began floating up into the air.

Pressure reached the entire planet as if the earth had sunk into the depths of an ocean.

This was an ending of the world that no one had seen before.

Fujiko clung to Akuto and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, but then static suddenly came from the mana screen.

That static was soon followed by a voice.

"No! That ending isn't allowed!"

The words were oddly accented and Akuto recognized the voice.

He turned toward the mana screen he had abandoned and he found a blonde version of Keena.

"Keena," he muttered.

This was the other Keena that had appeared as a distortion when Keena aka the Law of Identity had reset the world.

Akuto and the others had worked to erase her existence because she

was not meant to exist.

"Why?"

This unexpected development stopped his hand.

"I won't let you end things like that!" repeated the blonde Keena. "I disappeared because I was satisfied! But all of you aren't truly satisfied, are you!?"

Akuto stopped moving and prepared to respond to Keena, but the mana screen disappeared.

"Was that just an illusion?" asked Fujiko. "No, it couldn't be."

Based on Akuto's reaction, she was certain it was not an illusion.

He loosened his grip, the world stopped shrinking, and it slowly began returning to normal. The scene had been quite a spectacle, but the people gave no sign of noticing. They all walked through the city as if that scene of near destruction had never happened.

"We aren't truly satisfied?"

Fujiko looked at Akuto and he looked back before closing his eyes.

"It seems so."

"I had known this from the beginning. I had wondered if we were not actually satisfying you."

She kissed him and stepped through the door from the roof ahead of him.

He stared into the sky for a while before doing the same. He passed Yoshie as she came to the roof and she gave him a disappointed look.

"I'm a girl too, you know? So I don't like hearing that. I came here because I detected a distortion, but this is what I find."

"Sorry."

"I'm not sure how to respond to an apology either. But is there anything you want me to think about?"

She shrugged her shoulders in resignation.

"Yes. Please think about how to leave this place."

He looked her directly in the eye as he made the request.

"This is going to get lengthy. Let's talk in my room."

She urged him to return to their apartment.

Brave felt utterly defeated.

He had kept count up to the 35th time.

He had killed Akuto more times than that, but nothing had changed. Not a thing.

Bouichirou had stopped hiding his pity partway through and Brave had clearly felt the sympathy of one who had been through the exact same thing.

"You should stop. Surely you know that."

"I know all too well that someone is maliciously refusing to let me change history," replied Brave in despair.

"That's right. For some reason, this flow of events is not allowed to change."

"But I'm one of the people who caused history to head down that path."

"Yes. Even your futile struggles to change history are a part of that history. That is how it seems to work." Bouichirou sighed. "I realized after I died, that my death was already decided."

"Then I'm doomed to continually suffer in the same way? I have to repeat this unrewarded murder again and again as long as my will remains? And all of it is meaningless?"

Brave asked despite knowing the answer.

"Exactly." Bouichirou nodded. "That is undoubtedly your role."

"My role? So I have to work for the sake of someone's plot? Why?"

"In this world...no, that is not a good way of putting it. In any world, there is no one with free will. Even you are doing this because you desire the result that will satisfy you, but those thoughts are in line with the 'story'. What is happiness? If your stomach is full and a member of the opposite sex stands beside you, then you are satisfied. Even if that member of the opposite sex dies, the feeling of loss will not last too long. It does not create a gap that cannot be filled by another. Even those who seek out the finest foods despite their full stomach will settle for the food nearby when their stomach grows empty. There is no difference between biological satisfaction and happiness. If it were not for the 'story', that is. Many things are given value in a religious way: love, bloodline, success, one's view of life, *etc.* But in a purely biological perspective, such things should not be given value. Stories support the human intellect, but they also infect it like a virus."

"But we managed to resist it. We realized that and we're trying to destroy the natural story. We know the history reaching this point is unnatural. The characters have realized they live in an artificial story, so the story has grown unstable!"

Brave's eyes sparkled at this new discovery, but Bouichirou's expression did not change.

"That is the kind of story this is."

"What?"

"This is a story of divulging what stories are. The convenient deus ex machina does not exist simply as catharsis. It appears in order to tell us what it is we perceive as a story and to help us believe that the story is fictional. That god tells us of the pleasures and limits of the story. And thus we ourselves have become the deus ex machina."

Bouichirou pointed at himself and then at Brave.

"We are the deus ex machina?"

"Rewriting history can save one from any problem. Even an unfortunate death or a terrible failure."

"So...the deus ex machina hasn't been forbidden. It just will fail?"

"Yes. And that leads to a single conclusion."

"I get it. We're not the protagonist."

Brave was dumbfounded.

"That's right." Bouichirou disinterestedly dug into the ground with his foot. "And yet your role as a side character has yet to end. After all, Brave is now your only name and you have not lost that title. Most likely, all you are allowed now is to display bravery once everything has been lost."

"And yet I'm still a side character, huh? So who's the protagonist?"

He asked despite knowing the answer.

"That is of course the one who divulged several layers of fiction in the story. Most likely, the ending will come when he brings an end to the story exactly as the story dictates. The role of a demon king is to destroy the world, is it not? If a story does not allow the prince and princess to marry and live happily ever after, it must end with the world ending."

"In other words, I'm important?" asked Akuto.

He still could not believe it.

"I think so." Yoshie's expression was completely serious. "You will bring an end to the world. What exactly that means gets tricky, though."

"So whatever it means, I have to settle things?"

She nodded.

"The blonde Keena disappeared when she was satisfied, so you must be satisfied as well."

"I get that, but what does it mean for me to be satisfied?"

"You live in a fiction yet you hate fiction. You have a natural urge to divulge fictions, so you will do so one after another. You destroyed the system closing us in, but the next system activated. The fiction has multiple layers. It is in an infinite retreat. It's like a hell that continues on and on forever, so it isn't an easy thing to deal with."

Yoshie clung to him from behind as he sat in a chair.

"Quick question."

"What? I thought we were having a serious discussion."

"I'm asking because this is a serious discussion. Why are you hugging me from behind?"

"I'm indulging in my reward for playing the role of a side character. Specifically, the role of one of the three goddesses."

"But this isn't exactly a sexy topic of discussion."

"Won't you look more like a villain if you're stroking a girl while having a normal conversation?"

"Am I still a villain?"

She delighted as he tickled her cheek.

"Hee hee. If this upcoming role of yours isn't that of a villain, what is it?"

"Again, what am I supposed to do to make myself satisfied?"

"You need to bring this world to an end...but that's a tricky thing. First of all, we have to explain what exactly this world is." She began her explanation. "The afterlife changes based on our...no, mostly based on your thoughts. It's as if it were made for us. That means this world can take on any form."

"I understand that much."

"No, you don't really understand what it means for it to take on any form. Are you familiar with the concept of possible worlds?"

"Possible worlds?"

Akuto "recalled" a term he did not previously know as if scanning through his brain and retrieving the data.

"I see. It's a thought experiment where you assume a world where anything is possible and thus say anything logically feasible can happen."

"Yes. In other words, anything that can be described in text can happen. That also tells us the limits of this world: anything that cannot be described cannot happen."

Yoshie then began explaining the concept of possible worlds which was difficult to grasp just from the database information.

For example, the two statements "an elephant flew through the sky" and "Hitler visited Paris in the year 2000 AD" were both impossible in reality, but they worked in writing. If elephants were flying creatures and if Hitler had not died, they could occur even in reality. They were true in a world that could have been. In that case, it became clear that near infinite possibilities were contained within the world. They could even be seen as existing as infinite parallel worlds.

"You will create all of those logically possible worlds," said Yoshie as if giving an order.

"All of them?" he asked back in astonishment.

"What remains after that will be your own will. You will see all worlds and choose for yourself."

"I suppose I should search for the possibility of saving the world in this world where I can do anything. If I don't, we may never escape this place."

"In that case, I think you should start right away." She produced a mana screen and displayed a model of history. "The data you can view is a copy of that from the world just before it was destroyed, but you can use that

to calculate back and construct all possibilities.”

“But I feel like the worlds I would create would fairly ridiculous,” he said.

“That’s fine,” she replied. “Even the ridiculous worlds are a possibility.”

Akuto then decided to bring out those possibilities himself.

The world let out a groan.

Only a small number of people noticed it, but Brave and Bouichirou were of course two such people.

“What is this?” asked Brave.

Even as he asked, he felt the world losing its shape.

“This is the instant in which the world is altered,” explained Bouichirou. “I felt this on a small scale whenever you travelled back in time. The one doing it does not notice, though.”

“Then the one altering it now is...”

“Needless to say, it is the demon king. Activate the suit. We need to escape this.”

"Escape?"

He activated the suit's time travel functionality and expanded the range to bring Bouichirou with him.

"We will erase ourselves from this space. The demon king is freely altering the world of the afterlife, but we will remove ourselves as factors in that."

"You can explain later."

Brave travelled to a time period he had not visited before. In order to avoid being seen, he travelled to a tall mountain peak during a period when mankind had yet to develop magical civilization and was not even using electromagnetic signals.

"I figured you wouldn't want to be cold, so I chose a rocky mountain of only 2000 meters during the summer."

All they could see were rocky mountains and a forest down below. The taller mountains had snow on their peaks, but this sunny peak was warm.

"Thank you. The weather might be better here than in the afterlife. This cool wind is quite nice."

Bouichirou sat on a nearby rock.

"So you say the demon king has altered the afterlife?" asked Brave with

hands on his hips.

"He alters it all the time, but this time he altogether erased it."

"Erased it? You mean he's resetting it to redo it?"

"Yes. It seems the afterlife was a world the demon king has free control over. He likely realized that thanks to the knowledge of those around him."

Bouichirou sounded fairly bewildered.

"Free control? I thought that place granted everyone's wishes and his will was simply the strongest."

Brave was suspicious because the dead had been there before the demon king.

"It is possible the memories of those people were only created once the demon king arrived. It would be impossible for them to be aware of it, however."

Brave accepted that explanation, but his expression did not change.

"That's based on the theory that no one would realize it if the world and all our memories were created five minutes ago. I'm familiar with that, but if it's true...what does that make us?"

"That is a natural question, but it is a difficult one to answer as we are on the inside." Bouichirou chose his words carefully. "However, if we assume the entire universe was created by the Law of Identity, it means we are fictional beings, as is the demon king."

"That's what you were talking about before, isn't it?"

"The afterlife exists on the inside and we can think of it as existing inside the demon king."

"Yeah," agreed Brave. "I get it. We all died and were resurrected. But it was the demon king that resurrected us."

"That is how I understand it. The world has been reconstructed as data. Just as the former computer gods attempted to do."

"Then why did he erase it and try to redo it? If he's on the level of a god, why didn't he accept the world he created?"

"Based on his words, I assume it be because that was a world of an eternal ending."

Bouichirou nodded as if to say he understood the feeling.

"I don't really get it."

Brave had been frowning this whole time.

"He realized there is no story in satisfying his own desires."

"I realized that before he did. Otherwise, I would have been living with my girlfriend in this world."

"We cannot do that. That is simply the type of existence we are."

Hearing that, Brave finally changed his expression.

"Existence? You explained that earlier, didn't you?"

"If the people of the afterlife are fictional characters, we alone exist. The two of us and the demon king."

"The two of us and the demon king?"

Brave was taken aback.

"We may have been chosen by the Law of Identity. We were chosen as side characters, but we were still given important parts to play."

Bouichirou's expression was oddly calm.

"I do feel like destiny is playing a hand in things. And we weren't wrapped up in what just happened."

"The demon king is redoing the story itself and he will likely study the

result by using the people...no, the characters of the afterlife."

That was Bouichirou's conclusion and Brave accepted it.

"But there's no way he can do that."

"Yes. As he did not succeed the first time, he cannot succeed the second time unless someone else's power is at work."

"And that's what we'll do?" asked Brave in shock.

Bouichirou nodded.

"You have already made up your mind, haven't you? It is only natural that it be the hero who saves the world."

"But how?"

"There is a way. We will enter the demon king's world. We will enter, but we will interfere without being incorporated into it. We can travel on the path of history that the Law of Identity has created. Of course, there will be a sacrifice."

"A sacrifice?"

"We will be interfering with the demon king's world, but our individual personalities will not."

Bouichirou seemed to have made up his mind about something and that statement sounded ominous to Brave.

"What do you mean by that? What sacrifice?"

"Just like the Law of Identity, the demon king does not handle the people as individual personalities. The people all have an internal side, but in the story, all else is nothing more than a collection of elements unneeded for a personality. That will remain the same even after he reorganizes the world."

"I see." Having caught on, Brave took a deep sigh. "We'll be treated as a combined personality playing the role of the hero."

"Yes. It is most likely for the Law of Identity's convenience, but that is how the characters work in this world."

"I don't want that to happen," said Brave.

But then Bouichirou vanished before his eyes.

Brave closed his eyes as if scrutinizing the memories, consciousness, and knowledge that came flowing in.

He took several calm breaths and finally looked up into the sky.

"I understand. We have to put on a show for the Law of Identity."

Chapter 4: Countless Universes

Opening up all possibilities may have been a mistake.

The space itself was finite and the characters were finite, but the combinations were infinite. Opening up the possibilities was not just a concept. It actually released the walls of the world that supposedly existed within Akuto.

This was similar to further universes being born within him.

The props used naturally extended beyond him.

In other words, even the extra-universal gods became possibilities in the story.

As a result, all stories fell into chaos.

What is it called when stories fall into chaos?

The answer was included in a certain story from the past: the Tower of Babel.

Until then, it could be said that the story was shared by all. They had all been playing a part in that story and thus the world had not been allowed to interfere with the stories other than Akuto's.

So what if the people ceased to share the story?

That led to chaos.

The extra-universal gods all contained their own unique stories and were thus the protagonists of those stories. Those multiple protagonists had tried to advance their stories in the same space.

That may have caused a great disturbance, but it was not conflict. After all, the “weak” stories existed there in addition to the “strong” stories that attempted take the lead. The weak yet large ones ran everyday life. The strong yet small ones ran the oddities of life.

The concepts that explained the world’s structure and made people aware of their identity were large, but they had mostly blended into everyday life to the point of not being noticed. The stories of individuals’ lives were carved deeply into people’s hearts, but they naturally went no further than that individual.

Individuals.

It was only now that mankind truly became “individuals”. Even if they could speak to each other, no kind of relationship could be formed if they did not share the same stories. The relationships of friends, enemies, and even strangers could not be established.

When the possibilities were infinite, stories instantly became impossible.

Countless isolated individuals were formed.

First person.

Even so, stories...no, something even before that began.

I slept in darkness. No, I simply lay in darkness. I had given up. I did nothing.

I heard a voice.

It was distant. Or was it close? I could not tell.

Who was the voice calling for? Me? Someone else?

I had no way of finding out. It was even possible I had been the one to utter it.

It was possible I could confirm the existence of time for as long as the voice lasted. But it had no units. It was permanent. There was no guarantee the same word was not being repeated again and again. Even if a bell continued ringing for all eternity, there were no words to indicate a single, unique ringing of the bell. Which ring was it? Based on what division? In which eternity?

I decided to assume the voice was mine.

A story still had not been established. There was not even solitude here. After all, the first person was all that existed.

I produced sound.

There was sound.

I produced sound in order to speak.

There was speech.

There was language.

The correct answer could not be found.

It had no meaning.

It was not wrong or right.

It was meaninglessness. It was mistaken. It was a failure. Nothing existed there.

I moved my body.

There was movement.

Outside and inside. That division just barely existed.

There was movement.

Where to? Inside the space or outside the space? Heading inside led to nothingness and heading outside led to nothingness, but it was still a division. Even if a bell continued ringing for all eternity, there were no words to indicate a single, unique ringing of the bell. Which ring was it? Based on what division? In which eternity?

Even so, I counted.

I made a division.

The divisions increased.

I separated the heavens from the earth.

I moved.

I could move.

I could move the earth.

I stood. I stood using bones and the muscles of my back.

I hurt. But the pain was not everywhere. The pain was inside, but it was not outside.

I cried out.

It was meaninglessness. It was mistaken. It was a failure. That was all I had.

That mistaken noise was the only place a voice could be found. That error was all that was inside. The pain alone was there.

It was not there. I could not be sure. Mistakes were all I had.

So I made mistakes.

I made more mistakes.

I did whatever I could to make mistakes.

I made mistakes with a powerful will.

I made mistakes again and again.

And that led to...nothing.

I looked.

I mistook what I saw.

I mistook more of what I saw.

I did whatever I could to mistake what I saw.

I mistook what I saw with a powerful will.

I mistook what I saw again and again.

There was a mistake there.

I could see it.

I could see you.

Second person.

You stood in the light. No, you stood still in the light. You were there.
You did nothing.

You heard a voice.

It was distant.

It was calling out to someone. You? Someone else?

You made a division between you and others, between here and there.

You decided to assume the voice came from "there".

It may have been a story. You may have been solitary. After all, the voice may have come from someone other than you. After all, the second person existed.

You produced sound.

There was sound.

You produced sound in order to speak.

There was speech.

There was language.

The correct answer could not be found.

It had meaning.

It could also be mistaken.

You cried out.

It was meaningful. It was mistaken. It was a failure. You had all that.

That mistaken noise was the only place a voice could be found. That error was everywhere. The pain was there.

Mistakes were all you had.

So you made mistakes.

You made more mistakes.

You did whatever you could to make mistakes.

You made mistakes with a powerful will.

You made mistakes again and again.

And that led to...a story.

With that, reality became reality.

A story was needed to perceive reality because that was where a relationship with another was found.

But to reconstruct the story possibilities, Akuto needed a period of time bordering on the infinite. After all, he had to test all possible stories.

Even so, the stories immediately grew complex. In modern times, the number of stories grew explosively. That was because machines and cities became new elements for the stories.

However, the most troublesome part of the work was the elements brought in by the extra-universal gods. That included things not possessed by the Law of Identity.

Akuto fought with those extra-universal gods a few times.

Sometimes he won.

A story was created in which Akuto attended an academy in an unnamed alternate world. He was dominated by Fujiko and he struggled to help her take over the world. It ended with Fujiko's world domination never coming to fruition and the two of them never even kissing. He finished testing that possibility.

Sometimes the extra-universal gods won.

Akuto was in Dresden on February 13, 1945. The Allies performed a completely meaningless bombing and he was caught in the firestorm along with Junko. He was badly injured yet did not die, but he had watch helpless as Junko died before his eyes. Afterwards, he lived by standing in the city as a wounded soldier and begging for money from people, but he eventually died of malnutrition. That possibility ended there.

Akuto was born with the mysterious power to see ghosts. He used that power to work with a ghost version of Korone and resolve incidents related to complex human relationships. That story had no ending. Tens of thousands of stories were inspected and the testing of that possibility ended once they had all been completed.

Korea, July 1950. Members of the Bodo League were gathered from neighboring areas and killed in a cobalt mine of the former Imperial Japanese Army. They were killed because they were thought to be communists, but the league had actually been created to reeducate communists. Not only that, to increase the number of converts, people were given jobs and other incentives for naming themselves, so most of them were villagers who knew nothing of communism. Almost none of them were actual communists who were working with North Korea. The cobalt mine was chosen in order to bury the bodies. Akuto was killed there as one of the converts. What frightened him most before he died was that the Korean police assisting in the killing did not even know what communism was.

Yoshie was reincarnated in a different world and retained her memories

of her previous life as a modern person. The other world's science was at the level of the middle ages, so she did great things with her scientific abilities. This story's conclusion was not a story, so the test of the possibility ended quickly. This was because he was unable to deny the value of finally affirming the modern.

Junko ran away from home. She was a delinquent, so her family did not call the police to search for her. But as she wandered alone on the streets at night, she was abducted by a van carrying multiple thugs. They got her to tell them her situation and they were delighted to hear no one would be searching for her. They drugged her, raped her, and abandoned her in the mountains. Either they had drugged her too much or she simply ran out of strength before finding her way out of the mountains because she died there. The body was later found, but the criminals were never arrested.

A ninja arrived before Akuto, a normal boy. Junko, the ninja, was beautiful, but she had been raised in a rural area and had no knowledge of normal life. Her arrival brought chaos to the peaceful city. He attempted tens of thousands of variations on this story, but that was not enough and he proved that he could continue doing so almost without end. For that reason, he ended the investigation.

Fujiko was born as the daughter of a well-off family, but her parents loved flashy things and neglected her. Despite having plenty of money, they were oddly intent on raising her themselves. As if it were normal, they abused Fujiko before she was old enough to understand what was happening. She had no one but her parents to rely on and she possessed

no concept of god, so she continued adoring the parents who hurt her and that fact actually frightened those parents. The actual killing was carried out by her father. He swung her by her feet and slammed her into the wall. Her skull was split open and she died. Her parents paid off a doctor who was a childhood friend to hide what had happened. A year later, her parents had completely forgotten about their daughter.

Akuto developed supernatural powers that only appeared in girls and transferred into a girl's school for training supernatural powers. He was the only boy in the entire school.

At that point, Akuto ended the story creation.

He had decided it was all meaningless.

The stories were developing, but the ones he created were nothing more than projections of his longing for a ridiculous world where the pleasant things would continue forever.

Most likely, he would have no choice but to call that a variation of the ultimate form of a story. If one focused on an age of limited resources, they could even find stories that were nothing but eating one's fill. In every age, people wished to interact with others who were more fortunate.

On the other hand, the stories created by the extra-universal gods were intended to destroy his desires. Also, its outer surface as a story was

hidden, so it was shown as if it were the truth. That too was a final shape of a story.

He had already used millennia on this, but he began to have more than just a suspicion that the stories were hiding within humans.

To keep the story more flat, he prepared an infinite surface, chairs, a table, drinks, and a few fruits. Even that was enough to create a story, but it would keep the story to a minimum.

People could only perceive reality as a story and they would search for the ending of that story. That ending would be the end of reality. It would also be the end of the flow of time.

The story made clear attempts to resist. The story seemed to be making attempts to survive even if it meant destroying mankind.

Akuto called a guest to the space containing the infinite surface. There were few personalities that were not influenced by him and there had only been one person from whom he had been able to receive advice.

Hiroshi was there with a sheepish smile.

"Is this the first time we've spoken like this?" asked Hiroshi.

He was not wearing the Brave suit, but he was definitely still Brave.

"We've been apart for a very long time," said Akuto.

"I never really thought about speaking with you as an equal."

"Perhaps not, but I feel like we both realized this moment was coming."

"I didn't come here because you called for me. I chose to transfer to this time and space because I knew this moment was coming. For me it's been a few months, but has it been millennia for you? Either way, it's been a while."

"Sorry about having you come here."

Akuto smiled and held out a drink.

"This place is like a never-ending plain...or desert."

Hiroshi looked around.

"I could make it into any form, but I want to produce as few stories as possible."

"This really is your world."

"Yes, I suppose it is. What do you want to drink? I hadn't decided on that yet."

Akuto spoke casually and Hiroshi peered into the cup to find what had

no form beyond being a liquid.

"Water. Carbonated water."

As soon as Hiroshi said that, the contents of the cup transformed into cold mineral water with bubbles inside.

"I see."

He drank the water and it refreshingly wet his throat.

"What does it feel like to be able to do anything?" he asked after taking a breath.

"It feels like arriving at the farthest reaches of biological pleasure," immediately replied Akuto.

Hiroshi smiled a bit.

"I've never felt that."

"No, you wouldn't have." Akuto smiled too. "But we stand on the same stage. We're probably the only ones who haven't become a concept."

"A concept?"

"You can't understand someone's personality just by looking at them,

but now I can truly experience them. Even if other people's reactions are mechanical in nature, we have no way of determining it. What resides within me right now may be the countless personalities of all existing people."

"If a different object with the same name is placed in a box that only the individual can open, can conversation still be achieved?" asked Hiroshi. "If a foreign language dictionary has a sample greeting section and you communicate using that, can you still call it a conversation?"

Akuto looked amused.

"Yes. It definitely isn't like you to respond like that."

"While here, I am a synthesis of the concept of Brave," explained Hiroshi with a grin.

"I see. So a concept is a concept."

"I do understand what you're saying, though. The only ones given an incarnation in the Law of Identity's world are you and me. Wouldn't incarnation be the best term for being equal concepts before the creator? So in your world, the people inside are equally given an incarnation."

"I may be the creator here, but I don't feel like a god. What I can feel is that stories are binding us. Even when I create worlds, I am only free in which story I choose and to what degree I take that story. In the end, I want to destroy that and escape this world."

Akuto sounded sad.

"You want to destroy the stories? You've reconfirmed what your ultimate objective is, haven't you?"

"It seems so. I thought it would be easy when I first made up my mind. That was back when I decided to kill the gods."

Akuto sounded exasperated with himself and Hiroshi gave a bitter smile.

"Make sure you're able to go through with that. If you include the stories created after that, how many normal lives and how many trouble-filled lives have we lived? Also, Keena-chan and Korone-chan are still sleeping. They should last a few millennia, though."

Despite what he said, his tone made it clear he was not criticizing Akuto.

"That is exactly why I decided to consult you, the one who exists outside my story," said Akuto in a serious voice.

"I'm fine with complaints like that. After all, we were always a poor match. I was always lighter than you," said Hiroshi jokingly.

The two of them exchanged embarrassed smiles.

"That's right. You were always the more reasonable of the two of us. But

I can't imagine that someone who thinks normally would be suited for this."

Hiroshi confidently shook his head.

"That is no longer the case and that is why I can bring this story to an end."

Akuto did not seem able to believe that.

"Does that mean you're determined to kill me?"

However, Hiroshi showed no sign of faltering.

"Of course. Without you, I can rewind time and restart the many types of stories. You can even be there just not as the demon king."

"But that didn't work, did it? You've already killed me countless times, haven't you?"

Akuto merely sounded curious.

"Exactly." Hiroshi pointed at Akuto. "And that's the problem! In this world – yes, even your world – everyone wants to kill the demon king. And that includes you. The reason that doesn't work is because the Law of Identity's power is still at work here!"

That comment finally caused Akuto to flinch.

"Come to think of it, the blond Keena stopped my destruction."

"Yes. The Law of Identity must be killed before killing the demon king. That is the only way to resolve this."

A cruel smile appeared on Hiroshi's lips.

Akuto sighed and gave a sulking expression.

"You shouldn't say that when you know it isn't possible."

"I am fused with Bouichirou right now. I have his knowledge and it makes me somewhat bitter. I've been given a worthless life this entire time. That's the life of a side character."

Hiroshi reached for one of the fruits on the table. He was only able to recognize it as a peach after grabbing it.

"I do feel bad about that, but I'm not sure I'd say it was worthless. ...No, I suppose I view my own life as worthless now."

Akuto also grabbed a peach, produced a knife, opened a slit, and used a finger to peel it.

"That is why I can't come up with an effective solution," he said. "In the

end, there may be nothing I can do. I feel like I called you here to have you destroy everything."

His expression was dark, but Hiroshi laughed aloud.

"Ha ha. How about you stop being so mean-spirited?"

"Mean-spirited?"

Akuto peered into Hiroshi's eyes.

"I'm just saying there's still something you can do. I have an idea."

Hiroshi sliced off a piece of peach flesh and carried it to his mouth with the knife.

"Is there really something I can do?" asked Akuto.

"If you feel bad, it means you can at least feel responsibility," immediately replied Hiroshi. "The people inside you are nothing but pawns, but you don't view them that way."

Akuto gasped.

"That's right. My responsibility extends beyond you. There are also the ghosts of former personalities. When you get down to it, I'm the ruler of ghosts."

He bit into the peach as if he suddenly remembered he held it.

"Mankind was wiped out and you could say the people were turned to data."

"But people's actions were preserved as data in the past as well."

"The only ones you turned to data were the ones with existing souls. You can thank Bouichirou for that tidbit of information."

"Existing souls? You mean the existence that makes you yourself? That's the concept that appeared within Zero and can be synonymous with the Law of Identity."

"Yes. It's nothing but a concept, but it must be viewed as if it exists. You must assume that anything under the Law of Identity's influence possesses a soul."

"I see. If you view it as if it exists, it creates a difference between ghosts and data. The black magicians did say that necromancy was incomplete."

"What I'm saying is that you can summon ghosts."

"Ghosts, hm? If I do that, I may be able to learn what my mistakes were and understand this world."

Akuto threw the half-eaten peach and a long table appeared there. Four

chairs were now lined up.

Finally, a figure appeared beyond the horizon. The figure flickered like a flame and its features grew more and more distinct as it approached. It was a girl.

Either due to not expecting it or the influence of Bouichirou's memories, Hiroshi let out a cry of surprise.

"Teruya Eiko!"

That tall body with a nice figure and long hair tied back was indeed the girl who had once dealt in conspiracy and brought a deal to Akuto.

"My memories are pretty horrible," she complained as if it had all happened yesterday.

When she leaned forward as if to push Hiroshi out of the way, Akuto used his chin to point in the other direction.

"I know," he said calmly. "You were living in prison, weren't you? But if you're used to thinking, nothing is easier than solitary confinement. More importantly, sit down. I have prepared a table and chairs so we can have a long chat."

"Hah! What a terrible guy! Let's do that. I'm hoping my grudge is enough to banish your heart to some distant place."

She circled around the table, placed a seat in the middle, and sat in it while folding her legs as if to show them off. Her panties were visible below her short skirt, but she seemed to be showing them off as well.

"I never could like you," said Akuto.

She snorted.

"In relationships between men and women, there are some things that can't be changed by liking or not liking someone. Even after living for thousands of years, you're still a little boy, aren't you, Sai Akuto?"

"I'm less than twenty, you know," cut in Hiroshi.

She gave him a cynical look.

"Age isn't everything. You did look like an adult before, though."

"When I was fixated on the Law of Identity, you carried out a betrayal."

"Did you bring me here to criticize me?" She smiled. "At any rate, I did what was right."

"What was right?" Akuto's eyebrows rose. "How was that right? All you did was obey the computer gods and attempt to raise your social status in the real world."

"I don't feel bad about doing that." Eiko looked angry. "Even if the world was going to be destroyed, it was going to happen after my generation. I was going to enjoy my life and leave a decent society to the next generation. If the destruction is so far away, what else could I do? If you and I had been reformed, Bouichirou and I would have been able to travel to the future."

"You were trying to control society. You even tried to change the gods' data to trick the people."

"And what's wrong with that? You're too arrogant. Right now, you're treating the people as a single whole. The people, the masses, the populace, the citizenry, or whatever you want to call them. At the very least, they've faded into the background. With this afterlife, you should have realized that you too are controlling all the fools. You thought about giving them a religion to control them."

Akuto fell silent.

"You're the same. I may not have known the truth of some distant future, but you did the same thing when you were given an eternity of time."

"You're right." Akuto squeezed out the words. "It is the same thing."

"Just like you, I had no religious belief. Just like you, I looked down on those who did not think for themselves. The reason you didn't join me was because you ultimately believed the end of the world was coming and that someone had created the world. You actually did have faith. Faith in something irrational."

Eiko rebuked Akuto.

All of her words were convincing to him and he could only sink further down in his chair. Just like Bouichirou, he had believed in the Law of Identity.

"I haven't felt this good since before I died," said Eiko with a victorious smile.

"Normally, the dead do not have a chance to explain themselves," cut in Hiroshi. "The imprisoned truly are not on the side of justice."

His tone of voice changed as he left Akuto's small table and circled around to the long table.

"It may go without saying seeing as you are the demon king, but you do not need that kind of forgiveness. Not that you want to refer to yourself as the demon king."

Hiroshi's expression had become Bouichirou's at some point.

"It is my turn now. My prediction has been proven true, but that is simply because I based it on accurate data and experience. It is only natural that it came true. You ignored my warning. The extra-universal gods are now invading and throwing everything into chaos."

"And I must accept that as a mistake on my part," agreed Akuto.

"I was unable to exchange vows with the Law of Identity, but you could have done it. If you had, the world would have been saved. It could have continued eternally in some other universe without changing form."



Bouichirou's words were passionate.

"You say that, but you were obsessed with Keena...no, with Sudou Rimu," pointed out Akuto. "You weren't talking about the world."

"If my ego and the benefit lined up, why does it matter?" immediately rebutted Bouichirou. "You had the right to destroy the world. Your mistake was choosing to resolve it all by killing the gods."

"You're right. I gave up on thinking about it back then. I simply acted on impulse and resolved it in what Keena calls 'the boy way'. But I was trying to do what Keena told me when I did it."

Akuto began mumbling and Bouichirou smiled bitterly.

"The extra-universal gods are invading even the space where you can act freely, so the actual universe is likely the same. If you obtain true satisfaction and accept death, this space will come to an end. That will cause it all to scatter. Even those of us who were reincarnated here as eternal beings with a role to play will disappear."

"There's no way for me to save Keena, is there?"

"Keena and the extra-universal gods are of equal importance once you leave this world. And that includes the Law of Identity."

Akuto thought on Bouichirou's words for a while and then suddenly spoke.

"I'll summon the extra-universal gods."

Even Bouichirou looked surprised at that.

"Can you do that?"

"They should have been made a part of the story, too. I'm not sure how much we can understand each other since we don't share a story, but it should still be possible."

As soon as he said it, a black figure appeared in the chair. Everyone there could tell it were there.

They looked toward it and found nothing but shadows. Not even its species could be determined. However, when one looked away, someone was definitely there. It could only be seen out of the corner of the eye, so its sex and expression could not be seen. But when one looked back, there was nothing but shadow.

"I am the Empty Universe," said one black figure.

Just like their visual form, the voice could only be heard when not trying to hear it.

"The Empty Universe?"

Akuto's question seemed to get through and a faint sound that was not

made of words carried a distinct answer.

"It is a universe with no stories, no matter, and only a single voice. There is nothing but an occasional voice meaning 'you', 'du', 'vous', or 'sue'."

The meaning of the black figure's words reached Akuto. After putting the unique subject matter to memory, he asked a further question to hear more.

"So that voice saying 'you' is all that exists?"

"That cry of 'you' creates self-identity. That created a story upon entering this world. The second person. I am but a voice. 'You!' 'You!' 'You!' "

"But if there is a story, it can't be empty."

"The one calling out can never be met. Not by anyone. The voice merely continues to call out without change."

Akuto's image of the Empty Universe expanded in his mind.

It was darkness without darkness.

It was emptiness without light.

It only contained an echoing voice. It was nothing a monosyllabic cry

that repeated over and over.

The voice reached nothing. There was nothing but a being that thought someone else must exist.

It was not even clear if such a being was alone or if there were multiple such beings.

Either way, it could only eternally seek out another.

"That's hell," muttered Akuto.

"It is not even hell," denied the black figure. "There is not even suffering. There is nothing."

"The Empty Universe contains only beings," said a different voice.

Akuto looked over and found no one. When he looked away, a red-clothed figure appeared there. It had the same odd traits as the black-clothed one.

"I am the Formless Universe."

This voice was different from the black-clothed one's, but the voice would still vanish if one tried to hear it as words.

"Is that the universe of the Formless Power?" he asked.

The red-clothed figure gave no response and merely continued speaking.

“In the Formless Universe, beings blend together. The archetypal creatures have the boundaries needed to exist, but when creatures come into contact, those boundaries are destroyed. They devour each other. In this case, the beings indicate each other and let out a shout of ‘you!’ ”

His image of the Formless Universe expanded in his mind.

Many beings were there.

Beings resembling an amoeba, water in zero gravity, or a cloud wriggled through the emptiness in pursuit of each other.

They produced the same sound as the being in the Empty Universe.

<You!>

As they searched for each other, they would sometimes coincidentally come into contact.

And then...

<You!>

It was the same sound, but it became a cry of joy.

"The word 'you' means something different from in the emptiness, doesn't it?" muttered Akuto. "Now it means 'found you!' "

"They devour each other," affirmed the being in red. "They only notice the other in that instant. 'You! I finally found you!' "

The image in his mind changed.

Two beings bumped into each other and became a single being.

A new voice came from within the being.

"But a moment later, neither knows which they are. And despite becoming a single being, they are filled with a voice. 'Who!' 'Who!' 'Who!' In the Formless Universe, the cry of 'you!' lasts only an instant. Afterwards, there is only a being that is exposed to an unpleasant and never-ending voice."

"As soon as they find someone else, that other person disappears, but that other person forces them to learn what they themselves are," said Akuto as he gathered his thoughts. Once he did, his voice then grew sharper. "The unpleasant feeling of learning of oneself and gaining self-identity... The Law of Identity!"

That realization was immediately followed by another new voice.

“The Law of Identity can exist in the Formless Universe.”

This one was wearing blue.

“I am the Gravity Universe. There, the beings have become one with their boundaries and possess matter.”

The image in Akuto’s head changed to be the Gravity Universe.

There was light and darkness there.

The beings there still resembled amoebae, but they had a distinct boundary around them. That boundary could be likened to a cell wall and it glittered as it reflected the light.

<You!>

The voice rang out once more.

It was the same sound again, but it was now a shout of anger.

This time, the beings were clearly moving towards each other. They advanced through the universe choosing paths that would cause collisions.

“The boundary forces down the cry of ‘who!’ and they search out others to advance their own being.”

The words of the being in blue caused the image to move further.

The beings collided and the one with the weaker boundary would burst. That being would mostly dissolve into the universe, but one part would be taken in as part of the more powerful one's boundary.

"They prey on each other?"

Akuto's voice trembled and a voice he had yet to hear came from the being.

"When their barrier is lost, the being itself disappears, so in the instant that barrier is struck, they cry out. 'Death!' 'Death!' 'Death!' "

Akuto was left speechless and the voice of another universe spoke.

"Pleasure can exist in the Gravity Universe."

This one wore white.

The image in Akuto's head grew bright and the twinkling of stars was present.



It was primitive, but life forms were there.

The single cell organisms began to divide.

"I am the Anti-Gravity Universe. There, the beings multiply. The barriers grow and divide. It is filled with voices. 'Me!' 'Me!' 'Me!' "

<Me!>

Those were the voices of delight at being born.

"Love can exist in the Anti-Gravity Universe."

The beings there also preyed on each other, but when they collided, they each split off a part of themselves which combined to produce a new being.

<Me!>

<You!>

<Death!>

<Multiply!>

The universe was filled with lively voices.

"This is only a step away from the universe I know," said Akuto. "Is this all the other universes?"

The variously colored extra-universal gods gave a denial.

"These are the archetypes that created the different universes."

The extra-universal gods urged him to look behind him.

He looked toward the horizon without looking directly at it.

The entire horizon was filled with shadows. They were humanoid and countless in number.

They were not as simple as the ones he had seen so far. They wore many different kinds of clothes and they had clear sexes. Their shadows flickered only in the corner of his vision and each and every one undoubtedly contained hundreds of millions of beings. They all contained ghosts just like he did.

"Are they the same as me?" he asked.

The differently-colored extra-universal gods vanished without answering.

The other people representing universes that he had only caught a glimpse of finally faded into nothingness.

Only Akuto and Bouichirou remained at the table.

"They are likely the same as us."

For a while, the two of them were too shocked to speak, but Bouichirou finally agreed with Akuto.

"You and they are both universes. Perhaps we should refer to you as god universes. Before you released all of the world's possibilities, it may have been only you that was the same as them."

Bouichirou pointed at him and he let out a long breath and nodded.

"The birth of the universe resembled the birth of stories. If the universe really is multiple stories, then there must be countless beings like me outside of it."

"If so, there should be a spectrum," said Bouichirou confidently.

"A spectrum? What's that?" asked Akuto.

"It means they are divided into multiple levels. You could call it their story density. Think of them as having become stories to varying degrees."

"And we've done so to a much higher degree?"

"We know that the world is fictional. Doesn't that seem like a very high degree?"

Bouichirou's comment brought something to Akuto's mind.

The story of interference from outside the universe was centered on not perceiving the world as fictional. That was a story based on the assumption that one lived as only a single incarnation.

"I feel like I only came to understand myself once I saw the outside," agreed Akuto.

"But when you get down to it, even the extra-universal gods are fictional. They merely cannot distinguish between god, mankind, and ghost. Only once you inform the higher being and create an enclosure within a single universe can you make a clear distinction between the three. That allows you to understand who it is you are inside."

Akuto thought about Bouichirou's analysis.

"Okay. That means I need to think about how to respond to that higher being," said Akuto. "I don't just want to save the beings inside me. I want to save all the beings inside the Law of Identity's universe. I want to free them from the stories. That is my wish."

It was now Bouichirou's turn to think.

"The stories can only be viewed as a virus. Originally, life should have been complete once it was created in the Anti-Gravity Universe. No matter how complex the cells grew or how complex the reflection became, the life forms would only hunt, kill, and reproduce. That is all. There would be no sin or forgiveness there."

"But the extra-universal gods brought the story of unreasonable death into me. Its story density should be fairly low."

"In that case, unreasonable death is a natural thing. No reason is needed to kill. That would explain it."

"Nevertheless, we avoid meaningless killing."

"Avoidance of killing is due to the stories, yet you claimed the stories were the cause of mass murder."

Bouichirou's words caused Akuto to think once more and he summoned someone else.

He waved his hand toward the horizon and a muscular man with dark skin walked from that distant horizon.

It was Marine. He had once ruled the Republic, wielded the Formless Power, and fought Akuto. He had not wished for it, but he had caused the destruction of the world.

"I feel like I was called here to represent an ideology and it annoys me a little."

Just like the other summoned ghosts, Marine started by complaining.

"It seems like ghosts are always complaining to me," said Akuto with a shrug.

"Of course they are. You killed us. But you at least had the courage to face me without fearing criticism. I'll grant you that."

Marine gave a hearty laugh and did not hesitate to sit in one of the chairs.

"Since you're my ghost, that might count as self-praise," complained Akuto.

"Don't worry about it," said Marine. "Both humans and ghosts cannot distinguish themselves from others."

"Yes. That is exactly why I think we hesitate to kill. If we truly viewed ourselves as distinct, humans would have no laws outside of the biological ones."

"That is a positive side to the stories. Others exist inside us as ghosts and our love for that fact leads us to avoid preying on and killing them. Reproduction and dividing must hold the advantage."

Marine looked at Akuto as if to ask him if he finally understood.

"But I view you as a manifestation of the negative side." Akuto looked back at Marine. "That is why you are here."

"This could easily revert to a rudimentary argument. The state of ghosts creates others. The ghosts of the Republic's people are persecuted by the

ghosts of the imperial people. Pointing that out as an illusion is to cast aside the positive side."

Marine's reply was decisive and Akuto grimaced as if it had hit him where it hurt.

"I see. So I was the type to throw out the positive side along with the negative side."

"You are a loveless man," said Marine with a smile.

"So that is my sin."

Akuto's expression as always serious, but it grew completely stiff now.

Marine then showed a perfectly natural smile.

"Friend, you have found the answer to why I must criticize you. Isn't that enough?"

"But what does that mean?" Akuto exposed his emotions as he spoke. "I've more or less found something within me that I can't break through. I can't free everyone. I hold a contradiction and I know I can't resolve it."

"In that case," began Bouichirou. "Start by eliminating everyone but us."

Akuto hesitated to do so.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just do it."

There was great resolve in Bouichirou's words, so Akuto did as he was asked and eliminated Marine and the long table.

Silence fell and as Akuto and Hiroshi sat facing each other.

"Is this good?"

"Yes." Hiroshi nodded and seemed to have difficulty saying what came next. "I had actually made up my mind from the beginning."

"Made up your mind?"

"I knew from the beginning that this might be something you couldn't resolve on your own."

"I want to say I'm surprised, but I'm really not. I was called the demon king and that's exactly what I am. I'm a weapon and all I have is logic. I don't have love."

"I wish you'd realized that while still alive."

Hiroshi smiled and Akuto did the same.

"So do I."

"Now, let's get down to business." Hiroshi leaned forward. "Please create a world where I'm the protagonist."

"Eh?"

Akuto was confused.

"Create a world where I'm the protagonist and keep the story density as low as you can."

"It sounds like there's more to this than just a desire to be the protagonist."

"There is. Make it a world where I live as a normal person."

Hiroshi was serious and that alone kept Akuto from understanding what the boy was thinking.

"What will that accomplish?"

"In that world with a low story density, I will redo my life with my memories of the past intact and there I will write a story to eliminate the story."

Akuto's eyes opened wide.

"That is...surprising to hear."

"Stories have a positive side too, so it may be impossible to eliminate stories altogether. However, I can at least bring your story to an end."

"So you will write my story there...and bring it to an end?"

"Yes."

Akuto had never considered the idea, so he was bewildered.

"Can I really ask that of you?"

He could not predict what would happen, but he knew it would lead to a final ending if it succeeded.

"You can. This is something only I can do and, if you recall, killing you was my objective. And I have a feeling doing so will save this entire world."

Hiroshi's words were calm and he faced straight forward.

After a while, Akuto nodded.

"Understood. I will now reconstruct this world of the afterlife. Will

allowing a high influence from the extra-universal gods and returning to before the mana civilization work?"

"Yes. Around 1990 should be good."

"Let's try this. I'm leaving it up to you."

Akuto once more balled the world up in his hand and spread it out again.

Chapter 5: Incarnation

I said our minds are infected by the virus that we call stories and someone injected that virus into us.

I also said we must not cast aside those stories.

I have seen the original human race and the origin of "stories".

As a result, I am here now.

I am the writer of this story.

But before I could realize this duty of mine, I needed to experience the death of my former lover as described in the prologue. I started living in this world of low story density and I essentially lost my memories. I may have needed an experience that overloaded me on the story aspect of life.

Now that my memories have returned, I have taken a fairly long time to write the story of Sai Akuto's life that will end the story. This here will likely be the final part of that collection of writings.

However, it was not an easy path. Once the story approached its end in 2010, it required great resolve to begin writing the rest. Nothing would come to mind and I would simply sit still with a dull headache. As if an invisible ring were binding my shoulders, I was overcome by a strange uncomfortable feeling and a weight that restricted my movements. Even

standing up grew difficult.

That discomfort grew the more I resolved myself to write these records.

I knew what writers had long called that feeling: a slump or writer's block. Someone more pretentious may have named it a spreading mold or a black attack dog, but I stupidly called it the "crazy ghost".

The crazy ghost stays in the corner of my room and weighs down on my shoulders if I focus on it. If I sleep or focus on something mindless, it eventually disappears, but it would otherwise press down uncomfortably on my shoulders and force me to do some light exercise. To make matters worse, the exercise had to put a great burden on me to be effective and it felt a bit like a gamble. Sometimes it would help me feel better, but sometimes it would produce enough pain in my shoulders to provide an intense urge to vomit.

The pain was enough to completely eat into my everyday life.

Once I began to realize I could not defeat it or tame it, I finally realized what it was.

It was lightness.

In other words, the lighter the material I was going to write, the more interference I would meet when I started to write it.

I must write about this lightness in more detail. It usually refers to something superficial that does not require deep thought, but in this

case, it refers to being highly imaginary.

First, the characters that have left their physical bodies become the protagonists. That means they are not harmed by physical impacts that would kill a normal person and they occasionally use supernatural powers. That gives the characters deviant personalities that would be unthinkable with normal humans.

When writing a story toward a happy ending, there might be unhappiness, but it all has meaning. One method of avoiding an unhappy story is to not allow the characters to age and to keep their minds unchanged.

Whenever I tried to write a "light" story such as that, I would be overcome by a slump.

Then what about a "heavy" story? I tried writing those as a change of pace, but as the imaginative portion grew larger (even if the characters are realistic, the story is still fiction), the crazy ghost would always be waiting for me as I continued writing.

That was clearly interference from the story.

I felt as if I had seen the true nature of the story.

This story had been written to cast aside stories and this was obvious resistance. When I thought back, I could recall various difficulties in coming this far, but those had all come about due to the story itself controlling my memories and actions.

This is even true regarding book sales. People find light stories embarrassing, but it is the extremely light stories that they truly enjoy. A great number of people secretly buy light stories that fulfill their desires. On the other hand, heavy stories are said to capture the essence of humanity and those who write them are praised and said to be intelligent. Also, even the most absurd story will be believed as the truth if it becomes the scriptures of some religion.

Stories are a lot like gravity, aren't they? Doesn't their weight bind us and lead us to avoid "lightness"?

And if human nature desires that "lightness"...

I thought I heard a sound from within my brain. I clearly understood how to carry out my duty. The demon king had made this world and I had to guide the demon king and those depressed thoughts toward "lightness".

I quickly realized how to do that.

It had to be possible for the Law of Identity to access this world. The blonde Keena's attempts to stop the demon king made that clear. The Law of Identity desired a proper ending to the story, so I would show her that the story had been eliminated.

Given the structure of the world, she would have been hiding without the demon king's knowledge. The demon king was a universal being who had constructed this world, but the self-identity needed to form a story had to have been created. In other words, the Law of Identity had to exist

as a character. Nevertheless, the demon king had not noticed her in this world. He likely assumed she would not be present because Keena was asleep.

My objective could be described as having the Law of Identity and the demon king meet and I would do so via the story that rejects stories. That search would become the final story.

"I don't know what you're trying to say."

I had somehow managed to explain all of the above to a harsh Hattori Junko after calling her to a train station café in Kamata.

Or I tried to explain it.

She could be fairly intelligent, but she was stubborn and had difficulty accepting more far-fetched ideas.

I suppose I should explain who Junko is in this world. When returning the story to around the year 2000, the demon king gave us different personalities and lives. The world was created in 1990 and we were given false memories of the past. That past made Junko a former coworker of mine. As much story density had been removed from her as possible, so she was more or less a slim and plain woman.

"I'm saying this world was created quite recently. About a decade has passed since then, though. ...Anyway, I want you to bring back your memories from before that when you were a character."

I told her even more. Even if she could not rationally understand it, I figured she would more or less understand if she appealed to the instincts from her memories.

"There were some old manga like that. Were they called reincarnation stories?"

She sounded amused. Before my memories returned, I had consulted her about working as a novelist and writer, so this was not our first bizarre conversation. Normally, she might have thought I was crazy, but she was used to imaginary conversations.

However, she still had a strong distinction between fiction and reality, so it was difficult for her to tell she was enveloped by the idea of a "light" story. After all, accepting that would mean she was crazy too.

"Well, you can think of it as a game about a supposed past life. Anyway, I'm seriously searching for something like that. You can treat it as a game, but is there some common individual in both of our memories of the past?"

"We can't exactly go over all of our memories."

She stirred her iced coffee in annoyance.

"It can just be someone that led you to become a writer."

"In that case..."

She pulled out a notebook and began flipping through the many pages held under the cover. She found a plastic sheet with receipts, cards, and other things stuck in it and she pulled a folded piece of copy paper from it.

It contained a list of names and addresses printed in extremely small text.

"This is the list of people I played tabletop with. This girl here is the one you're interested in."

The name she pointed at was very strange.

"These aren't real names. They're really chuuni."

"We were young. They're pennames, but that's all we ever called each other. This girl got me really hooked on the games and that's what led me to become a writer."

She gave a nostalgic smile and I copied down the address.

"What's her real name?"

"Hm... What was it? I've forgotten. Ahh, but it's on the tip of my tongue."

"It doesn't matter. So you say you knew her from those games?"

She carefully folded the old and worn copy paper.

Tabletop referred to tabletop RPGs. One would act out the role of a character in the game and tell a story like that. Essentially, it was a way of enjoying a story that was spontaneously created from nothing but conversation.

"I'd like to do it again, but I don't have time. Are you going to search that girl out? If you find her, tell her about me."

Junko smiled as she spoke.

I could tell she had once enjoyed creating a story and that had led her to become a writer.

I immediately visited the address, but I found nothing like a residence there. I instead found a new building. The apartment building given in the address seemed to have been demolished. Junko had said she had played the game during college, so this girl with the chuuni penname had likely lived in a cheap apartment for college students.

Finding the location of a former resident of the apartment building seemed like it would take a lot of work and it would be faster to check with the other people I know who had been reincarnated(?) before me.

My next appointment was with Yoshie.

"You want to know what led me to get this job? You're as crazy as ever."

She was several times harsher than Junko. She often went beyond joking and reached the level of abuse. She was short and weak, but her movements and voice were always exaggerated. Unfortunately, she was not a genius here and the only point in common were the glasses and how she did everything her own way.

She worked at an editorial production in Shibuya and we had been coworkers long ago. I had managed to meet her at the production office on the pretext of it being about work.

She lacked the ability to listen to what people said, so I did not even try to tell her about her former memories or anything like that. She would tell me to "get real" and the conversation would end there. However, she was always willing to talk about male idol groups. To her, reality was what actually existed. To be honest, I found it hard to figure out why she had taken a job dealing with stories.

"I'm investigating the connections between different writers' relationships," I said to give a reason. "During a certain period, they tend to be influenced by the same thing."

"I did it because a friend told me it was an easy and profitable job," answered Yoshie.

She had no experience with writing and she had no interest in novels or movies. Even so, it seemed a friend who was already a writer had introduced her to it.

"There was nothing I wanted to do. Once you're actually doing it, all office work is a pain. Go tell the company I deserve a raise."

"I don't work for the company."

"Then at least tell them how great I am. Also, treat me to lunch."

Conversations with her always strayed off track like that. She was utilitarian and never gave anything much thought. At any rate, I had to finish what I came to do, so I asked about the person who had introduced her to being a writer.

"She was from Yokohama. She should still be working as a writer for an editorial production there."

She told me the Yokohama company name and I jotted it down.

"Why is a writer like you asking something so meaningless?" she asked.

She of course had no talent for writing. Due to being introduced, she had been given office work to do and had not been fired. Because (she believed) she was in charge of the writers, she would often find fault in whatever writers did.

"You wouldn't understand," I told her.

I could not expect the intelligence Yoshie had once had. She was currently only interested in profiting and it all came down to money. She

seemed to snag men from somewhere, but most of her desires were focused on money. Then again, that was one form of happiness.

"Still, you must've been saved by a writer's story at some point in this job. Have you?" I asked.

"I watch the Friday drama," she immediately replied. "I really want to know what happens next. She may be a side character, but that girl is so cool."

Once she began talking about that, I was forced to bring the conversation to an end.

Here, Yoshie was extremely indifferent when it came to stories. No, perhaps "unaware" would be the better word. She would react to "light" stories, but she had not noticed the "story" of money's value that was controlling her and that was exactly why she had not gained monetary success. To accumulate money, one needed to control that desire or to have greed large enough to be noticeable.

Still, she was not as unhappy as she let on. She would likely get married at some point and then live a relatively happy life. Or she would if this world were eternal.

In the end, she too had been saved by the stories. The "light" stories gave her daily amusement and the "heavy" stories only affected her enough to subconsciously follow them.

It came to me then that she had been "tamed" by the stories.

But when I brought it to words, I was also overcome by a sense of self-doubt. What if this world was truly reality and my thoughts were nothing but delusions? The idea that stories were a virus and that realizing that protected the special side of this world would be nothing more than an arrogant madness.

I could only trust that this investigation would make it clear whether I was mistaken or not. I decided to contact the editorial production Yoshie had introduced me to. I only needed to see if Yoshie's friend was there, so a single phone call would suffice once I had the number.

The answer came quite easily.

"That employee did work here, but she quit last year."

The president answered me directly and I asked for her name.

"Um...〇〇...no, Soga."

The first name he gave seemed to be a penname. To my surprise, it was the same as the name I had heard from Junko. I was even more surprised that the real name was Soga.

I desperately suppressed the voice that threatened to leap from my throat, politely asked him to contact me if he had a job for me, and hung up.

It was sounding more realistic that a single individual had interfered with our lives here and that she was the Law of Identity. I had asked the president for her address, so I only had to head there.

The address was an apartment between Yokohama Station and the old Takashimacho Station.

The area contained tiled and unused land that had been left undeveloped and was not residential or business land. Trees had been planted to hide the empty land below the overpasses. I had only travelled a few minutes from lively Yokohama, but this strange space seemed completely empty.

The apartment building was relatively new and luxurious, but it smelled oddly like a rundown area. I sensed the unique dimness of an unsafe area of town and the lack of people seemed eerie.

I checked the nameplate on the proper address and it contained a name other than Soga.

I knew it might lead to nothing, but I decided it was worth checking. Even if someone else lived there, they might know the forwarding address for the mail if the move was recent.

I rang the bell and spoke into the intercom that I was looking for a "Soga-san". The door opened and an old acquaintance walked out.

"You're finally here!"

It was Fujiko. Of course, she had a different name in this world.

She was a beauty with long black hair, but that was the only fictional aspect of her. She was already married and she was not my type, but I was still nervous about facing her. She stood out enough to gather curious gazes when the two of us were together, but she was otherwise completely ordinary and she had a sociable personality. She wrote horoscopes that did not sell and she was married to a government worker. We occasionally contacted each other due to our work.

"You live here?" I responded in frantic confusion.

"This is about Soga-san, right? Come in."

She slipped on her sandals and opened the door wide.

Inside, I saw a wooden table, a cupboard, white wallpaper, and nothing that stood out. However, she did not seem to be living with her husband. From the amount of tableware and slippers, she seemed to be living alone.

"There's a lot I want to ask you about," I said.

She gave a broad smile and pointed at me.

"Your memories came back, didn't they? Amazing, isn't it!?"

"You mean the memories of Constant Magic Academy?" I hesitantly

asked.

"Yes! It really surprised me! It's like a fantasy."

She was so excited that she forgot to offer me a seat. I could not believe I had hit the jackpot like this. It was enough for me to feel dizzy.

"I think this is a more serious issue than that," I said reservedly.

Her excitement lessened somewhat, but she seemed to want to talk about a lot of different things because no one else in this world remembered. I wanted to give clarity to my own memories and confirm that I was not mistake, so we discussed those memories for quite a while.

Our memories did indeed match up. Oddly enough, we both retained our personalities from this world and the events of those memories felt like a dream. Our personalities here were not all that different from the ones in the memories. I had not lost the side of me that was an author and Fujiko was still a sociable fortune-teller even if she was no longer domineering or intent on world domination.

"It's strange to think that was me," said Fujiko.

"But there's no other way for our memories to match up like this."

"I never read your novels, but maybe now I will."

"You never read them?"

My shoulders drooped.

"If I had, I definitely would have doubted these memories."

"I suppose you're right. At first, I was partially doing it subconsciously."

"Now, about Soga-san," she said.

"Right. She lived here, didn't she?"

"Yes."

She lowered her voice and nodded.

"What's with that look?"

"Oh, she said it was a secret."

"A secret?"

"Well... My memories came back a bit before yours did. I was doing a past life horoscope and it came to me."

"How does that lead to Soga-san?"

"I started by doubting my memories from before 1990."

"Yeah, those were implanted into us, weren't they?"

"I searched out my first memory upon coming here and it was related to Soga-san."

"I see. So the method I chose wasn't wrong. Both Junko and Yoshie were led toward their jobs by Soga-san."

"But she said you alone are special."

"Me?"

"Yes. She said she had only sent you a letter."

"A letter?"

"Yes. She said she could not directly meet with you no matter what."

"Why not?"

"Hmm. She did explain it to me, but I didn't really understand it. I think it had to do with Akuto viewing the world through you and so you couldn't meet the Law of Identity."

Fujiko sounded apologetic as she did her best to explain and I grew

uneasy.

"But I can still contact her, right?"

"It seems you can speak with her through the internet."

Fujiko pulled out a pad of paper placed in front of the cupboard. It had some English characters that seemed to be an internet phone address.

"This seems so cold."

It seemed too light for what I had been seeking. Then again, "lightness" was exactly what I sought, so it may have been appropriate for the end of the search.

"You don't have to rush, do you?" asked Fujiko.

She seemed to want to speak further.

"No," I replied.

She enjoyed speaking of those memories, even if those days had been very "heavy" for me.

I did not return home until late at night, but I booted up my PC and started the internet phone software. If I could speak with her, I wanted to do it as soon as possible.

I made the call and it was immediately answered.

"I have been waiting," said a calm voice.

There was no video.

"Soga-san?"

"That name is not wrong."

According to my memories, this manner of speech did not belong to Soga Keena. It belonged to the Law of Identity.

"The letter I received was not from a 'Soga'."

I recalled the letter that Fujiko had mentioned.

That letter had led to me becoming an author and it had come from a childhood friend. Of course, I now knew that was based on false memories. At the time, I had been oddly moved. Even if it was a false memory, I did not want to believe it was.

"I apologize for deceiving you, but that letter came from me."

"If you say that, it actually feels like you saved me. Or perhaps not. Are there records of you living in this world?"

"Yes. As you have learned, I got to know the others, married someone you do not know, and have a family."

It felt like I was being mocked.

I of course had no memory of meeting my childhood friend since then, but I had of course appreciated the girl who had valued my talent during middle school and secretly sent me a letter.

"This is a terrible end to the search. Can't you even let me see your face?"

"Before you, I too am nothing but a story," said the Law of Identity.

That was certainly true. I was merely speaking over the internet. If I was to doubt that, I could doubt anything about my situation. Fujiko and Junko were acquaintances, so she would likely have known I had said some odd things to Junko. And if she had read my novels, she could pretend to have the same memories as me. Faking the Law of Identity would not be hard.

"So even if you're a fake, your value remains the same?"

"Even if it is all a lie, convincing him is what matters."

"You mean the demon king? But I thought my goal was to convince you, the Law of Identity. Won't you save everyone?"

"No. Well, I suppose you could say it is both. You have recorded the story of the demon king. That means you have properly acknowledged this world and that convincing you is the same as convincing him. Of course, you must also convince me."

The Law of Identity's voice was flat as if being mechanically altered.

"You mean we must convince each other that the story has ended?"

"Yes. So show me the records you have made."

As she insisted, I transmitted the final file – that is, the final volume of my novels – over the internet phone.

She confirmed she had received it and then I waited.

I could say nothing until she did.

As a record, meaning could not be found in it.

It would simply have a forced influence on the story.

At the moment, the "heaviness" was stronger.

"Do you think the virus has infected the mind or the body?"

That was what the Law of Identity said first.

I felt obligated to answer even if I did not understand.

"Isn't it both? I think the body is infected first, but it is the mind that is controlled."

After a short silence, she asked another question.

"The truth he needs to learn is that the story has ended and that learning that truth will save the people. Correct?"

It was a strange question. I was not sure what she was attempting to confirm.

"I can't say for sure, but that is what I thought. He attempted to save the world. No, since the afterlife and the Law of Identity exist, I think he must have believed it could be saved in some way."

"As you are aware of that much, I will now give you these final words."

"Okay."

I waited, but I received only silence as if she were hesitating.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, I will give you those words now," she said. "You are incarnated and imprisoned here. That is the role of the hero. The world will be saved. Those living there and those who can entrust themselves to the lightness of the story will eventually come to me."

She said nothing more.

"Wait! Wait!"

I called out but received no reply.

In fact, the account I was connected to disappeared.

I may have been tricked. I may have truly gone insane.

Only hopeless words echoed through my mind.

It seemed something had ended.

No, something had ended.

That much I could tell.

There was no mistaking it.

But I did not know what it was that had ended.

I had a feeling that I would most certainly face tomorrow. The sun would rise in the morning and I had a manuscript nearing its deadline.

But his story had ended.

The salvation of the people that Sai Akuto had wanted had ended.

I stayed awake until dawn and then went outside.

The usual city scenery surrounded me.

I entered coffee shop and ordered a hot dog and coffee. The clerk definitely existed.

As noon approached, I contacted Fujiko.

She did not remember what had happened the day before, but she spoke with great delight. She sounded as happy as when we had discussed the other world.

Junko invited me to join a tabletop RPG game. She claimed to have suddenly had an urge to play because she had not done so in a while.

I decided not to contact Yoshie.

The three of them were no longer Fujiko, Junko, and Yoshie. It would be

best to call them by their names in this world and to treat them as such.

I started walking to my workplace and thought I heard a metallic noise from underfoot.

There were fetters there. Or rather, I was overcome by the sensation of heavy chains around my feet.

Those chains were the "heavy" stories.

Those stories did nothing but bind us, but we still felt grateful for them and would occasionally use "light" stories to temporarily forget about them.

But those without physical bodies had certainly "lightly" escaped. And in doing so, they had left a hint telling us how to escape the stories.

Those of us with bodies remained here where we simply wandered through this world.

Chapter 6: Evolution

Korone leisurely awoke to someone calling her name.

"Please wait as I activate my memories. ...Sorry, but the viscosity of my oil has increased. Can you bring me an oil can?"

She sat up in her futon, took the oil can, and chugged it like a can of cola.

"It would be too much of a pain to give the exact number, but it has been over a thousand years, Akuto-san."

She smiled.

"Sorry about that." He looked embarrassed. "I was in a dimension where time was meaningless."

"I do not know what you mean, but I assume everything has been resolved in some way."

She stood up and looked around the area.

The passage of ten thousand years showed itself in the deterioration of the room, but it still functioned well enough.

This was the space station in which Keena had been put to sleep.

"Are you the only one here?" asked Korone in her pajamas.

Akuto alone stood in the space station room.

"Yes, but anyone can join us if I call for them."

"I'm not sure I understand." she said curiously.

She must have failed to call in data from the gods because she tilted her head.

"The gods are not responding. I cannot create a transfer circle either. Mankind does not exist. How did you do this?"

"You'll see soon enough. By the way..." He pointed out the window. "Has the earth been like this the entire time?"

"Yes," she replied while looking down at the planet. "It is still too soon for the surviving life to flourish."

Due to the meteor, ocean had remained only on a portion of the earth and everything else was covered in brown clumps of rubble.

"Hiroshi-san did his best, but it was useless."

"Did he try to stop the meteor at the very end?"

"Yes."

"I see. He was that kind of guy. He saved me too. He was probably my only true friend. Oh, I said I could call anyone here, but he's the one exception."

A shadow fell over Akuto's face.

"You have been saying quite a few strange things. What happened?"

Akuto nodded in response.

"It would be difficult to explain, but that's fine. We'll have plenty of time afterwards and I can probably take you along."

Korone still looked confused, so he winked at her.

"You seem different from before. At any rate, if you have some goal in mind, shall I wake the empress?"

She turned to the edge of the room where a coffin-shaped cold sleep device sat.

"Please do."

"Then I shall. But if you can call in anyone, why not call in someone else

to look after her?"

"Having someone else here would ruin the emotional reunion," answered Akuto with a shake of his head.

"I see. Please wait a moment. Wearing pajamas would be rude, so I will change."

She began stripping off her pajamas.



"Hurry it up."

He began operating the cold sleep device's console and the machine activated, but it would take some time before she woke up.

"Oh?" said Korone in admiration. She was now in nothing but her underwear. "So you can remain composed around female nudity now? I had thought something had changed, but it seems that change was the loss of your virginity."

"C'mon..."

He spoke, but he did not deny it.

"That mature reaction is rather disappointing. You truly have grown."

She made a show of wiping away tears.

"So who was it that took your virginity?"

"Could you not worry about that?" he complained.

She slipped on her school uniform and he finished inputting commands into the console.

The countdown until thawing began.

"How moving," said Korone. "This means you intend to restore the earth, doesn't it? Will you be able to reconstruct the empire?"

"No." Akuto shook his head. "We're not going to the earth."

"Is there another planet we can move to? There are no planets outside the solar system, after all."

Korone was surprised and Akuto appeared unsure how to explain.

"What is it?" she asked. "Stop hiding things from me and give a proper explanation."

"That isn't it. You could say we'll be evolving."

"Evolving? What an odd thing to say. For one thing, biological evolution means to-..."

He cut her off as she began explaining.

"I know that, but I can't think of any other way to say it. Basically, we'll be shifting to another universe."

"Shifting?"

"That's right. In other words..."

He trailed off as the cold sleep device emitted a noise.

He stopped explaining and pressed the switch to open the coffin-like cover.

The heavy-looking cover clicked and cold air flowed out from the gap. It then slid to the side and the coffin began to look more like a bed.

The person sleeping there was an empress rather than a princess, but she was a beautiful girl in white all the same.

Keena slept calmly while surrounded by cold air.

She looked like she had only just drifted off to sleep, but Akuto had been waiting to see that face for a very long time.

"A kiss would be best to wake her."

Korone may have been joking, but Akuto silently leaned down toward her.

As his face approached hers, he felt her irregular breaths tickling his cheek.

"You're awake, aren't you?" he said.

She almost burst out laughing with her eyes still closed, but her lips were covered before she could.

It was a long kiss.

Her arms wrapped around behind his back and the two of them stood up together.

"I missed you."



"To me, it feels like only yesterday."

"Then I managed to make it easy for you," he said in relief.

"But," she said as if hinting at something. "I feel like I had a very long dream. In other words, I know a bit about what happened...over there!"

She pinched his side through his clothes.

"Ow! What do you mean what happened over-... Oh!"

When he realized the Law of Identity had to know what he had done in the afterlife, he began sweating. She was likely referring to what had occurred between him, Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie.

"Um...well...about that..."

He grew flustered, but she started laughing.

"But I forgive you." She held his hand. "We'll be together forever now, right?"

"Not even I know what our life will be like from now on."

"Hmm. Where we're going now is where all stories end. It is the place mankind will continue to strive for from now on."

She must have heard that from the Law of Identity because she did not seem to know what the words meant.

“The place mankind will continue to strive for from now on, hm?”

That eternal dream would likely remain within mankind thanks to the “light” stories. They would strive to reach that place where the lightness of stories finally reached zero.

“Do we have to perform the ritual to create a void body?” asked Akuto.

“It seems so. I don’t know the details, but it basically means we’ll get married for real.”

Keena sounded excited and began the process without waiting for Akuto.

That ritual brought both the stories and one’s body down to zero and created a void.

Creating that lower body known as a void body was the first step toward becoming a being not of this world.

It was data made of imaginary numbers.

It was space with no time.

It was a place where the laws of physics came to an end.

It was beyond causality.

It was casting aside one's earthly form.

It was the salvation of all.

Keena took Akuto's hand.

For his transformation in the negative direction, all of the noisy souls inside him were transferred into her.

Countless voices filled the space between them.

Countless thoughts were there: Junko's, Yoshie's, Fujiko's, Lily's, women's, and men's.

"What does it feel like to be saved?"

"I've never experienced it, so I wouldn't know. Well, we'll know soon enough."

"It must feel like binding with Akuto-sama on the most fundamental level!"

"You've lived a carefree life, haven't you? Personally, I guess it doesn't really matter."

"President, you need to be more honest with your desires, arinsu."

"Like hunger, gya."

"Guga."

"More importantly, will our desire for prestige be fulfilled there?"

"Is hem-hem all you can think of when you hear the word salvation? You sure are savages!"

"Quiet, you black savage! Also, the student council president is the carefree one!"

"I'd rather you called it being relaxed. More importantly, there's a few more people who haven't shown up, right?"

"Apparently they won't show up if the storyteller has forgotten about them."

"That's about the most basic meta comment I've ever heard. Are you sure we should be doing that?"

"If you search carefully enough, you'll find Rubbers and that fly guy."

"Please spare me."

"Should we call in that ramen lover?"

"No!"

"You should not discriminate against male characters."

"Headmaster!"

"Then again, I'm just about the only male character that hasn't become the storyteller."

"What about the members of that demon king worshiping black metal band? They had names, didn't they?"

"They're being saved, too?"

"All of the souls are being saved."

"Hmph. Well, fine! Everyone, come on out!" shouted Junko.

All of the souls gathered.

They let go of their anger, sorrow, grudges, and envy. They left all those

things in the real world.

The entire universe shrank down.

Space folded up around Akuto and completely closed.

"Will you be taking me with you?" asked Korone as she was sucked up into Akuto.

"Zero showed that a L'Isle-Adam gains a sense of self once a personality sets in. You too have a sense of self."

Akuto smiled and his own physical body rapidly shrank as he was taken into Keena.

Finally, Keena turned inside out and disappeared into the new land that was the anti-universe.

All that remained was emptiness within emptiness. That emptiness did not even contain words. In other words, a new Empty Universe had been created.

But let us move back in time a bit.

In a fraction of an instant, the smallest unit of time that could be written of as time, this conversation took place.

A single being remained in the Empty Universe.

Just the one.

"Am I... Am I being left behind?" asked the hero.

The voice belonged to Hiroshi, to Bouichirou, to Kento, and to the storyteller.

"Yes. As I said before, you will remain," replied the Law of Identity.

She appeared to be a god of salvation, but she was also a cruel god.

"Why!?" he shouted bitterly.

He had half expected this, but he had hoped there would be salvation for him as well.

But there was not.

"You must remain here to leave the story here. That way the next souls can continue on as well."

He found that hard to believe and shook his head.

"But that's too cruel!"

"I am aware it is cruel. That cruelty can be felt through the story. You will simply be starting over from the beginning. In the next instant, you will be in an Empty Universe, followed by a Formless Universe, and then it will shift to a Gravity Universe. That will likely take tens of thousands of years."

"Please stop! I have to redo the story?"

"Because of who you are, that is unavoidable."

"Because of who I am? I can't escape that!"

"That is what it means to be the Law of Identity."

"I will be the Law of Identity?"

"You are the next Law of Identity. If you are to be saved, it will be when you act as the Law of Identity and successfully guide the new personalities. The story will be trapped by gravity, so you must guide it toward lightness."

"But that's so sad. I have to part ways with everyone?"

"Even sadness will be outdated and obsolete under the story that will take effect in the next instant. You will not be parting ways with everyone. There must have been souls other than yours that were not saved by this story of the Demon King in the Very Back, so if you become the next Law

of Identity, you will not be alone.”

That conversation occurred in the smallest unit of time, but there was no concept of time for the hero once he was within the Empty Universe that contained his mind.

He thought for eternity.

He thought of nonsense as nonsense.

Who could prove that he was sane?

This was the same as that.



He could do nothing but speak.

"Is someone there?"

He would search.

"I found you!"

He would shout.

He was forced to create stories.

In order to reach the best possible salvation, he had to head toward the worst possible conclusion.

Even so, if he repeated it all, he would arrive at the place he could glimpse in the distance.

He hoped against hope that the distant glimpse was not merely an illusion.

And once he arrived there, what would he do?

"I know there is something beyond all this."

For that reason, he decided to start it all again.

Afterword

I've left you waiting for quite a while. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. Thank you for buying this and thank you for sticking with me to the end. I am truly thankful. If this is your first time with the series, I hope you will go ahead and buy all of the volumes. I kind of doubt you can enjoy just this final volume, but you can start with Volume 6 if you saw the anime.

As an author, I am usually prepared for a single series to last for one to three years, but that is only if it has regular releases. This one took approximately six years. That was probably a long time for the readers, especially the students. That is the same length of time as middle school to college entrance exams. Looking back at my own past, a year seemed like a long time back then.

I know it's a problem for me to say it, but I started this series with the idea that I would keep it going as long as I could without thinking much about where it was headed. Even so, the last bit became kind of hard to understand. I think the six year time period helped in that regard. If you did not understand it at the time, you can reread it after reading plenty of other books and you should understand where I was coming from a little more.

The light novel industry has a lot of unfinished or cancelled series, so I am truly fortunate to have finished a series like this. Not only that, I had the wonderful experience of getting a drama CD, a manga from the illustrator himself, and an anime. I would like to thank everyone involved in all of that.

As for my state of affairs or at least my situation a bit before writing this, what is written in this book is accurate. There are of course some differences, but I feel like I had a similar experience.

Even so, I am prepared to continue as an author. I will say goodbye for now, but I hope you will show some interest if you ever come across the name Mizuki again.

April 2014. Mizuki Shoutarou.

Series Overview

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT1 (1 February 2008, ISBN 4-89425-660-6) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2 (1 May 2008, ISBN 4-89425-703-0) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT3 (1 September 2008, ISBN 4-89425-759-7) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT4 (1 December 2008, ISBN 4-89425-794-8) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT5 (1 March 2009, ISBN 4-89425-830-3) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT6 (30 June 2009, ISBN 4-89425-882-2) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT7 (1 September 2009, ISBN 4-89425-929-4) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT8 (1 December 2009, ISBN 4-89425-966-9) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT9 (1 April 2010, ISBN 4-7986-0029-1) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT10 (1 July 2010, ISBN 4-7986-0077-2) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT11 (1 December 2010, ISBN 4-7986-0150-2) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT12 (29 September 2012, ISBN 4-7986-0460-2) いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT13 (March 29, 2014, ISBN 4-7986-0799-1)

